

SALLY  
SALT

BY  
MRS.  
WILSON  
WOODROW











SALLY SALT









David Robinson

“Berta will carry you like a bird.”

# SALLY SALT

*By*  
MRS. WILSON WOODROW

*Author of*  
THE SILVER BUTTERFLY  
THE BEAUTY

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
DAVID ROBINSON

SYNDICATE PUBLISHING COMPANY  
NEW YORK      LONDON

COPYRIGHT 1912  
THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY



# CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I THE SYMPHONY OF DAY . . . . .	1
II AN OLD, NEW DREAM . . . . .	18
III A CLOUD IN THE SKY . . . . .	34
IV BEYOND THE HILLS . . . . .	46
V ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS . . . . .	67
VI A WIFE OF SATAN . . . . .	79
VII MRS. HURD GOES HALVES . . . . .	94
VIII STREATHAM TELLS A STORY . . . . .	109
IX MORE OF HILDA'S SECRET . . . . .	130
X HIRED MAN OR HUSBAND? . . . . .	145
XI MRS. HILL FREES HER MIND . . . . .	162
XII MRS. HURD'S NEXT MOVE . . . . .	179
XIII TIGHTENING THE SCREWS . . . . .	196
XIV BESIDE THE POPPY TENTS . . . . .	210
XV WHISPERS AND GLIMPSES . . . . .	221
XVI AUTUMN WITHOUT ANTHONY . . . . .	235
XVII HILDA MAKES CONFESSION . . . . .	253
XVIII THE QUEST OF THE ROAD . . . . .	267
XIX ANTHONY'S STRANGE LETTER . . . . .	283
XX LUCY TAKES COURAGE . . . . .	297
XXI DAUGHTER OF DREAMS . . . . .	312
XXII THE HUNT FOR GRISSOM . . . . .	324
XXIII ANTHONY COMES HOME . . . . .	339



**SALLY SALT**





# SALLY SALT

## CHAPTER I

### THE SYMPHONY OF DAY

**I**T was barely dawn when Sally Salt walked across the fields. A dim, gray world still in its night-dream lay all about her. Trees and hills were colorless spaces of shadow, meadows sweeping in every direction were colorless spaces of light; and through the waiting silence of the earth—consciousness waking, but not yet sentient—the musical, monotonous ripple of the river reached her, unchanging, unhurrying, unresting—timeless. The same to-day as a million years ago, and the same through to-morrow's million years.

On its brink Sally paused and lifted her face, for a wind, fresh with the purity of the dawn, had begun to blow, the shadows and half-tones merged

into a clear, cold spread of light where every tree and every leaf on the tree was defined against a sky changing like an opal. A bird soared from the wheat, singing; the sun rose from the hills; the fields of young corn became vividly green, the wheat-fields yellow. Sally stood gazing over those wide lagoons of grain until a stronger gust blew from the sunrise and they rippled into beautiful brown shadows, then she bent her head a little and seemed to listen.

The air was full of countless, mingling sounds; the whir of grasshopper wings, the twittering of little birds, the soft, immaterial presence of the wind, stealing through the corn and fattening grain with creeping feet and caressing hands and singing its faint, sighing song. It was the tuning up of an innumerable orchestra for the glorious Symphony of Day.

And Sally, as she stood on the river's brim, the waves of the cockle-starred wheat flowing up to her, encompassing her waist high, was herself the epitome of the harvest. She stood straight as an Indian, a woman a little above medium height with a deep chest and slender hips. Her red hair was



held in a great loop high on her head, and her skin was tanned to a lovely, mellow brown with a stain of crimson on either cheek, rich and dusky as the bloom of a peach. Her blue eyes were at once shrewd and reckless and warmly, deeply loving, while the prodigal curves of her red mouth were stayed at the corners by sharply defined dimples of laughter.

The tuning was over, the first movement of the symphony had begun, and Sally drew a long breath and wakened like the earth, her mother. The sun rose in her eyes; a song swelled in her heart; her lips parted in a smile; the summer seemed to glow through her.

"He's walking down some road that leads to me now," she murmured. "Maybe it will be to-day, maybe it will be to-morrow; but it's got to be soon; the wheat's ripe."

She drew a head of the harsh, bearded grain lovingly through her fingers; then she threw back her head and held out her arms:

"I'm hearing your footsteps, Anthony; they're echoing in my heart."

Then, sighing and smiling, she went her way,

across her fields, across the broad, white turnpike, through the orchard toward the house, which showed in glimpses through the trees; a rambling, gray farm-house with wide porches. As Sally's inclination prompted, she added to it a wing, a room or a bow-window; but now, in midsummer, its irregularities were softened, almost concealed, by the vines in which it was embowered. From the green lawn-spaces before it rose some noble old trees, with long, drooping branches, while at the side, between the house and the orchard, lay an old-fashioned garden, bright with flowers.

As Sally came up the path, a little, faded, elderly woman, who sat in a rocking-chair on the porch, leaned forward and peered curiously through the vines.

"Why, Mis' Salt," she cried in a thin, quavering voice. "Where you been? It's 'most breakfast time."

"I hope so," said Sally heartily. "Please, Mrs. Nesbit, tell Aunt Mandy to hurry it up. I'm hungry."

As Mrs. Nesbit passed through the widely opened hall door into the house, drawing her crocheted

shawl more closely about her, a gay voice called "Sally" from an upper window and light feet came running down the stairs. Two sleek, lazy cats, sleeping in the sun, rose, arched their backs and yawned; an old dog ran about the corner of the house and down the path, wagging his tail in welcome. All was life and stir and movement; Sally had come.

The possessor of the gay voice and flying feet sped across the porch and over the lawn. "A sheaf of letters for you, Sally!" cried Lucy Parrish, as dainty as a peach blossom, as flitting and airy as a humming-bird, twenty-four years old and looking sixteen this morning in her pink muslin frock with her dark hair hanging in a plait down her back. Born in the middle-west, the only daughter of wealthy parents, she had, while scampering over the continent a few years before with a chaperon only a shade less volatile than herself, met young Parrish, also an American, and with more money than was good for him. They had been married in London a month or two later without the customary consultation of friends. On the whole, the marriage had been more successful than Lucy's relatives had

sighingly and head-shakingly predicted; but as they continued to point out, not without a show of reason, this incursion into matrimony was of a too brief duration (young Parrish had died within a twelvemonth) adequately to refute their pessimistic prophecies. Lucy had now, quite unexpectedly and for the first time, after her usual fashion of adopting an idea and acting upon it simultaneously, returned to her home in the neighboring town of Yoctangee. Her parents were absent, traveling in Europe—she was fully cognizant of this fact, by the way, but it was lacking in significance until she saw the unoccupied, boarded-up house, with shuttered windows like blank, unseeing eyes, and barred door inhospitably refusing her shelter. Then, in a panic, she sought her old friend, Sally Salt, the mistress of "Buckeye Farms," and arranged to spend the summer with her.

"You are not the only one who has letters," said Lucy gloomily, as Sally caught at the six or seven envelopes and ran over them, quick as a gambler shuffles cards, her glance devouring each postmark and inscription, her irradiation in eclipse, as no rubber-stamped, unfamiliar name suggested a pos-



sible, paradisaical village where lingered the one from whom she desired words—the one who, by merely scrawling characters upon an envelope, characters tersely proclaiming her name and post-office, could cause her eyes to gleam, her heart to beat wildly, her strong brown hands to tremble.

“I’ve had a letter from Anne Heath,” continued Lucy, her tone expressing an aggrieved protest against what she evidently regarded as a sky-filling tragedy.

“Oh, Anne!” Sally turned from disappointment and resolutely considered the tragedy, but with indifferent tolerance. “Anne’s all right, except she’s older than the hills and thinks she knows everything in heaven or earth. It’s her last year in college. But let her come. Why not?”

“I knew you would say that. You have no sympathy in your soul; and yet think of it. Think of my only brother having a daughter like Anne! People do not know that he is nearly twenty years older than I, and she is my niece—my niece, and I not twenty-five! You know that she carefully, very carefully, never fails to call me ‘aunt,’—and still you are not sorry for me.” Lucy threw out her

hands as if casting to the winds this statement so incredible that her mind refused to harbor it.

"Not a mite," affirmed Sally tranquilly. "I'm not sorry for any one who isn't blind or sick-a-bed; and what you need, Lucy Parrish, is no petting nor coddling, but a good shaking. Young—"

"Young!" interrupted Lucy scornfully. "Twenty-five is not so very young—"

"Young," repeated Sally firmly, "and rich and a pretty doll," glancing down affectionately at the charming figure beside her. "Oh, if you expect to get any sympathy out of me, you'll have to search some time, and if you do find any, you'll have to jerk it up by the roots when I'm napping. I won't give you any, I know; and as for that lonely bee you've had lately, I'm afraid it will have to sting you pretty hard before you are willing to shake it out of your bonnet."

"But I am lonely, Sally." Lucy was indignant that doubt should be cast upon the existence of her crumpled roseleaf. "Look at me! All alone in the world with Anne for my only relative, on this side of the ocean, anyway. If it wasn't for you, I'd die."

"I guess so!" remarked Sally dryly. "That bee once got stuck tight in my bonnet. I too had only been married a short time when Henry, my husband, died. Well, I had enough—the farm he left me and the farm father had left me, so I didn't have anything to worry about. But I was young and terribly lonely, and every time I would look in the glass that bee would buzz louder and louder, and he'd say: 'What's the use of looking like peaches and cream if there's no one to tell you so? What's the use of being young and a woman if there's no one to love you?' "

Lucy, wistfully dejected, with drooping mouth and eyes fixed on the low, blue line of distant hills, nodded full appreciation of the lonely bee's disturbing sentiments.

"Well," continued Sally, "it was just about that time that Clarence and his mother wanted to get summer boarding, and at first it seemed an answer to prayer. I was so tired of my own society that I would almost have welcomed the devil. So they came—and you observe that Mrs. Nesbit is still with me."

"Oh, Sally! You have never told me about

Clarence. What was he like?" Lucy sank down on a grass plot between two beds of Madonna lilies and tried to pull Sally down beside her. But Sally protested.

"Now, child, I've got no time to spin yarns for you. It's a big world, Lucy, and there's a lot to do in it; but I must say that at this minute I don't know that I could put the time in any better than doing a little weeding right here in your heart and soul. Hand me that trowel, though; I might as well be bedding a few geraniums at the same time," her eye falling upon a neat row of flowering crimson and pink plants ready to set out.

"But tell me about Clarence." Lucy was apparently alarmed at the prospect of a soul-weeding.

"H'm, Clarence! Oh, yes, Clarence." Sally dug vigorously in the yielding earth. "Well, he wrote nature poems and essays. The essays always began, 'I noticed to-day from my study windows that the patch of snow on Farmer Allen's field has melted, and that the willows along the river are assuming,' et cetera. And the verses were always about dryads of the leafy woods harkening to the pipes of Pan. Then Clarence birded, too."

"He what?"

"Birded. He used to sling a field-glass over his shoulders, stuff his pockets full of note-books and take a camera; and then we'd go out and sit as still as mice on the hillside, and presently he'd lift his glass and say: 'H-s-ss-h! There's a scarlet tanager flying through the blue,' or 'Ss-h, in yonder thicket is a speckled thrush. Wait till I look at my notes.' Then he'd take his books out of his pockets and turn over the leaves, and finally announce as important as a robin that's found a worm in the asphalt: 'That speckled thrush is three days earlier than usual.'

"Why, Lucy," Sally paused carefully to lower the roots of the geranium into the hole she had just prepared, "I'd got positively ashamed of the way we used to follow up those poor, inoffensive birds. Clarence never showed the least respect for their privacy. And he was always frightening them off their nests about hatching time by snapping his camera at them."

"Horrid thing!" commented Lucy indignantly.

"The artistic temperament." Sally packed the earth loosely about her plant. "I believe that is



what they call it. I've never been able to discover rightly just what it is; but I know from the experience I've had with several friends who claimed to be afflicted with it that it goes with a powerful appetite. Clarence would sit at the table with a black silk necktie flowing from a low-necked shirt and he'd be reading away so's he wouldn't know if you dropped the stove-lid on the cat, and all the while he'd be sort of idly conveying to his mouth cup after cup of coffee and more muffins than Aunt Mandy could well bake. But in spite of his appetite he was very sickly, and I was so sorry for him that we almost got engaged.

"You see, Lucy, I was a regular 'Miss Busy' in those days. Am still, I suppose; but then I was one of those smart, capable, do-it-all girls who always take up with the poor, weak brother. Finally Clarence got really sick, and his mother, you know," with a backward nod at the little old lady swaying to and fro behind the vines on the porch, "his mother had no force, so I nursed him to the end. Funny thing, he always seemed actually pleased at his being so delicate—regarded it as a sure proof of genius. There were times on his death-bed," Sally spoke

almost pensively, "when I literally ached to spank Clarence."

"Why, Sally Salt!" Lucy's tones were faintly scandalized. "Didn't you nurse him to the very last?"

"Please God, I did," said Sally simply. "If you saw a little sick kitten crawling around so weak on its paws that it could hardly stand steady, wouldn't you tend it some? Of course. Here, hand me that portulaca, Lucy. Funny thing. I never was one to moon over books, but the winter Clarence was sick I took to novels as some people do to drink. You see, he needed a good deal of care, and my rest at night was considerably broken. Before that, when I chose a story, it would be about a sweet, titled young girl who moved continually through pleasures and palaces; but that winter I craved stories about smugglers and burglars and murderers—any one who was taking a risk."

"How very different he must have been from Anthony Streatham." Lucy's gaze reflected the blank innocence of the skies above her; her voice held only a reflective and impersonal comparison, and yet, at the mention of that name, Sally's glance

was not more quick than the deeper peach-dye on her cheek.

"Of course." There was a touch of red-haired asperity in Sally's voice. "But," more mildly wondering, "how did you happen to think of him?"

Lucy Parrish was equally casual. "I do not know, I am sure. It is about time for him to come, isn't it?" pulling up grass-blades and weaving them between her fingers.

Sally paused in her digging and looked up at the waving green branches above her head. "If I could tell you why that bird is hopping from bough to bough, I'd feel competent to prophesy some of Anthony Streatham's movements."

"He is certainly unexpected. That is a part of his charm, I suppose," agreed Lucy. "But to go back to Clarence." Oh, the dew-washed innocence of her tone, the skyey blankness of her eyes! "After it was all over, didn't you get lonely again, Sally, and feel the need of companionship?"

Sally Salt had risen to her feet and was shaking the earth from her blue gown, and now she paused to look down at her companion with a warm, humorous scorn. Did this amateur Diana, all pink ribbons

and white embroideries, lying along the ground like a peach petal, with demure, lowered lashes, hope to trap her, Sally, in nets as frail and obvious as her woven grasses?

"Child, it's buzzing," she warned. "That lonely bee's buzzing loud. What you want to do is to get busy. Now, for my part, I have no time to sit on stiles and wish some one would come along and love me. I've got plenty to love, and plenty of work to do, and I guess that's a plenty for me. I've got everything living on this place to look after. I've got to get the best yield out of every foot of land on these farms, and what's more, I've got to treat the land so's it will want to give its best.

"I ever get lonely!" Sally Salt stood superbly upright and tossed her head, shining like red gold in the sunshine. "Spend my time studying to please a man!" But the fervor and conviction of the sentiment was not corroborated by her voice. Her gaze dreamed for a moment on the dim blue hills, and she did not meet Lucy Parrish's suddenly uplifted eyes.

"But you like men. You know you do." Now that she had ceased to probe, perhaps had discovered

what she wished to know, the careful indifference of Lucy's voice gave way to a natural gaiety. She abandoned her lolling pose and smoothed out her peach-petal muslins.

"Of course I like men," averred Sally stoutly. "They live sensible lives and get to know something. I enjoy having them about; but marriage is different. It's too intimate, and there are very few people who can emerge from an intimacy with even a decent respect for each other. And then it's the dickens of a bore to be always trying to please some one. Now, Lucy Parrish, do you think I would ever try to melt myself down and run myself over into another mold for the benefit of any man on earth? No," with an individual upward toss of the chin, "I'm going to live. I'm going to follow any crazy idea that comes into my head. I'm going to be free."

"So am I!" affirmed Lucy with ardor.

"You!" Sally's incredulity was explosive. "What about John Witherspoon?"

"John Witherspoon!" It was Lucy who was now aflame with indignation. "He has nothing to say in the matter. Why should he have? Just be-



cause he has always lived in Yoctangee and took it into his head to fall in love with me when he was a young man in college and I was a little girl in a pink bonnet, asleep in church, do I have to marry him? It would be much more suitable for you to do so, Sally; you are nearer his age, and then your farms adjoin."

"He evidently prefers twenty-four to thirty-two," said Sally equably, "and anyway, he wouldn't have me as a present. Truth is that he's so responsible and safe and sure that he bores himself to death. He wants the excitement of chasing a worthless little will-o'-the-wisp like you and climbing out of the bogs that you lead him into."

Before Lucy could answer, a tall mulatto woman with a red and yellow bandanna twisted about her head appeared on the porch.

"Miss Sally," she called, "you an' Miss Lucy bettah stop your all confabulatin' an' be comin' in if you wants any breakfast. It's been ready dish yer ten minutes."

## CHAPTER II

### AN OLD, NEW DREAM

**I**T was noon that day when a stranger paused at Sally's gate and leaned for a moment upon it, gazing appreciatively at the embowered house, the green lawns and flowered garden spaces. He was a tall, thin, loosely-built fellow in a flannel shirt and gray trousers, a gray coat thrown over one arm. He had evidently walked many a mile, as the dust on his heavy shoes indicated, yet he bore no trace of fatigue in this moment of relaxation; rather, his attitude bespoke a contented languor, as if he had at last reached journey's end.

He drew a long breath and leaned more heavily on the gate. "The hunter home from the hill, the sailor home from the sea," he murmured, his eyes still dwelling affectionately upon this scene, of inclosed seclusion, steeped in sunshine, dappled with shade, lying in the noonday calm as if in a golden

dream. They were eyes which shone oddly light in his deeply tanned face, which was darker by many shades than his sunburned hair. Gray eyes—the clear, cool gray of water flowing under a sunless sky—light, candid, amused—in a chance encounter; but in those periods of silence which Anthony Streatham never hesitated to permit himself in whatever company he might be, they clouded, became remote, almost hooded, as if by the exercise of will, he screened his thought with the veil of impenetrability.

This contradictory impression of the eyes was borne out in all the other features of his face. The line of the cheek was long, suggestive of the oval, but this was corrected by the straight, square chin. The nose, delicate, arched, was usually pronounced aquiline by those who failed to notice that it was almost coarsely blunted at the tip, a bit of modeling at variance with its thin, fine bridge. The mouth was meditative, even melancholy in repose, yet the curves of laughter etched their creases deeply about the corners of the lips and almost obliterated the compressed line of scholarly asceticism.

The soul of good fellowship, delighting in all

kinds and conditions of men, Streatham had, in his freest, blandest moments of hobnob, a quick fashion of narrowing his eyelids, a slight, impatient twist of his shoulders, as if he resented the least encroachment upon his preserves of personality, refused even the soft fetters of friendship and asserted an irritable and wilful freedom. And yet, all these contradictions of manner and expression endeared even while they disturbed and troubled. They resolved themselves into a part of his inherent and individual charm—the charm of the giver who, if asked to go a mile, would willingly go twain and enliven the way with a jest and a song, who would give his “cloak also” and forget, even while shivering in the blast, that he had ever possessed one; the charm of the Gipsy who knows the green aisles and camp-fires of many a forest; of the wastrel of the night who sees his visions of the day burst into flowers of flame against the city sky; of the scholar who loves learning and delights in all quaint and curious knowledge; of the stroller through life’s bazaar who sees behind every curtain the eternal romance—pink almond blossoms drifting on the

falling fountain, the tinkling guitar, and Fatima of the languorous eyes. An eager stroller, with ever quickened interests, and yet a weary one withal, for ever on the jeweled enamels of the bazaar he saw the vitreous stains of corrosion, the moth that ate its way through the pomegranate-bloom embroideries; and no matter who set forth the wares, he discerned for ever the skull behind the mask, and bartered with the grizzly shade of disillusion.

But apparently satisfied with his leisurely survey of house and garden, he finally opened the gate and sauntered down the path. His far-sighted, observing eyes had evidently caught a glimpse of Sally's gown through the trees, for he turned undeviatingly toward the garden and followed its labyrinthine walks as if they had long been familiar.

Sally, who had been at work in her shade garden, as she called the tree-thatched, ferny space where the light-shunning flowers grew, rose to her feet at the sound of his footfalls. She listened a moment and then moved forward a few, involuntary steps, pushing back the hair from her brows. She had passed out into the sunlight and it dazzled her eyes; she put up both hands to shield them. It



was characteristic of both of them that she did not put out her hand in greeting and neither did he offer his.

"The fields are white," said Anthony in a low, rapid voice, with a stammer in it, "I hope the laborers are few."

Sally laughed. The joy that always lay in her laughter rang deep and full, as if it rose from some unfathomable and unfailing spring, whose heart was peace, whose bubbles were mirth.

"Funny thing," she said innocently, "there always seems to be a vacant place about the time you come. Your room's ready." Then she wrinkled up her nose, "Aunt Mandy's frying chicken; there are new peas, new beans, new beets, new everything, and all the crispy salad leaves that you love. There are berries and melons and cherry pie. I don't believe you have had anything to eat."

"Oh, Sally, s—stop," he stammered. "Of course, this is a dream, the same delightful old dream that I've dreamed for the last three years and hope to go on dreaming for ever. But one moment, let me look at you. Oh, Sally, my poor eyes have been failing for a sight of you." He threw himself on the

grass and drawing a case from the pocket of his coat, lighted a cigarette.

Sally, meanwhile, had seated herself upon a circular wooden bench built about a great beach tree; her red head was thrown back against the smooth trunk and her hands were folded loosely in her lap. The noon sun filtered through the dense growth of leaves above her and fell in bubbles of light over her soft, tanned throat and blue cotton gown, and spangled with gold the violet shadow of the long, drooping branches which almost swept the ground.

"Yes, this is a dream," mused Streatham. "Sally, not long ago, in the course of my wanderings, I paused at the home of another widow; still young, well-dowered, handsome, and she entertained me with sprightly conversation. She said: 'Here is Smith's last new novel. Have you read Jones' charming volume of essays?' She had spread a table with new books, she offered me mental husks and I, as usual, was physically hungry."

"Another one of your flirtations?" There was a faint chill in her voice.

"No, Sally dear," in gentle reproof, "but to be strictly honest, it might have been, if I could have

succeeded in convincing her that she alone could reform me; or, to put it more accurately, if she could have succeeded in convincing herself that she might possibly achieve that crowning glory of her sex—snatch a brand from the burning. Yes, I am convinced that if she could really have believed that she could transform me from an eager back-fence prowler, with dark alleys to thread and a world of alluring ash-cans to explore, she might have been induced to return my affection.”

“That’s an idea all women get in their heads some time,” said Sally, “preachers and women. They like to dangle the souls they’ve saved as an Indian dangles scalps. Truth is, no one ever saved any one else’s soul. It’s a job every man is expected to attend to for himself. But it’s one we’re all mighty fond of shirking. It’s a lot easier and more exciting to fish for the mote in your brother’s eye than to get a derrick and crowbar and a few utensils like that and go earnestly to work to dislodge the beam in your own.

“There are half a dozen farmers about here whose farms are mortgaged to the hilt, but they’re always ready to lean over my fence half the day,

if necessary, and tell me how I'm mismanaging my land. And there's plenty of women who can't raise a crop of chickweed in their gardens, ready to stand at my gate and sigh and shake their heads and tell me what a pity it is that I've got slugs on my roses, and how spindling my geraniums look, and what a dreadful extravagance and waste of money my garden is anyway. But there, I'm running on as usual, about nothing at all. What is more to the point is, what have you been doing for a year?"

He flicked the ashes from his cigarette. "Chasing life."

Sally bit through a blade of grass, looking at him meditatively, almost curiously.

"Why do you chase her round and round in a circle? She's always right at hand."

"Oh, no, she isn't. She's a butterfly who flutters her bright wings in the sunshine just ahead of me, always out of reach, just ahead, just around the corner, so near that I can touch her, but never quite grasp her. Sometimes I think that I seize and hold her fast, but when I finally and cautiously open my fingers clutched so tightly over my treasure, I find a dull moth, or worse still, a caterpillar."

There was silence between them for a moment, while Streatham blew smoke among the ferns and watched it curl up through their fronds.

"Whom have you with you now?" he said at last. "You always have some one, you know."

"Lucy Parrish," began Sally.

"Pretty Lucy, with the inevitable and worthy Witherspoon for a background!"

Sally nodded. "She's nearly in tears because Anne threatens to come."

"The estimable Anne," he lazily commented. "Well, Anne wouldn't be so bad if she had any temperament."

"Oh, Anne's a good girl according to her lights," defended Sally. "She isn't very interesting--"

"No one is very interesting," he interrupted, "unless he or she has a brilliant capacity for making mistakes. If Eve had resembled Anne, we should all still be in the Garden of Eden. Consider, Sally; if Anne had been Eve what would she have done when the serpent offered her the apple?"

There were deep glints of fun in Sally's eyes, but she answered without hesitation, "She would have said, 'No, I thank you, I was told not to eat



the fruit of that tree,' and she'd have gone on feeding the animals as conscientiously as you please, with never a thought of that fascinating serpent coiling himself around that tree, the better to show off the spangles on him."

Their laughter mingled and swelled.

"But Lucy Parrish and Anne!" said Streatham. "That doesn't sound like the assortment of the imbecile and the invalided which usually cluster about you. What is it the pious call them—God's poor?"

"God doesn't know anything about them," Sally stoutly affirmed. "He never made them. They are entirely the work of man."

"You believe in putting the blame where it belongs, do you not, Sally? And how is my little friend, Harris Hurd?"

A shade passed over Sally's face. "Oh, I'm bothering a lot about Harris! The little fellow was bitten by a dog the other day, a poor, little, lost, frightened dog. They shot it without waiting to see whether anything was the matter with it or not; and all these idiotic people for miles around are predicting all sorts of horrible things that will happen to Harris. I've prayed every day that a saving circus

would come along and take their minds off the child."

"I'm sorry to hear this." There was real concern in Anthony's voice. "We must do something about it. Good Lord!" he said below his breath, suddenly raising himself upon his elbow, "who is that—that man, out there in the road? Quick, Sally."

Sally looked up hastily. "Oh, that is a man by the name of Grissom, who has been about here lately."

Strolling along the roadside, unconscious of their observation, was the man who had excited Streatham's immediate interest. Not the usual passer-by of the country road, in all certainty. As seen in the glare of this high, noonday sun, he was a thick-set, muscular fellow, with a coarse, handsome face, vivid in coloring, but impassive in expression; bold, dark, keen eyes, lips set in a straight, thin line and clothes of a late and pronounced style. An unmistakable type; at once the hunter and the hunted, whose lair is in the populous and indifferent heart of great cities, and whose jungle paths are streets

roaring with traffic, and echoing with the eternal, unceasing footfalls of many passers-by.

In that great jungle heart, where daily a thousand eyes fall upon him, and a thousand hands would clutch if they but knew, one might fancy that he could know no security; but the city is his refuge. He seeks it with the instinct for protection of those birds and insects which are so perfectly adapted to their environment, that their hues simulate the tree trunks, the grasses they crouch among, the checkered light and shade falling on the hillside. And this man was so essentially urban, so of the town in certain localities, that he would there pass unnoticed. But in the country he detached himself from the landscape and loomed colossal and sharply defined on every horizon.

"Yes, that is Grissom," said Sally, leaning forward to make sure. "What he wants here, I don't know. From present indications, it looks as if it might be Hilda Hurd."

"Hilda Hurd!" Streatham exclaimed, abandoning his lazy attitude. "Oh, that will never do!"

"It certainly will not," she averred. "But why

did you ask about him as you did? Do you know him?"

He looked at her for a moment a little strangely, an odd smile flickering about the corners of his mouth. "I fancy," he said deliberately, "that we have met. I think that on more than one occasion we have both been among those present. What a problem it all is, anyway!"

"The problem that confronts you now," said Sally coolly, "is that we are going to begin to cut wheat this afternoon. You might as well be getting ready to work."

"My first day," he reproached her, "and such a hot one, too. What are you going to do?"

"Oh, I shall be there, too," said Sally. "I'm going to drive a reaper. But come, you must have food."

All the long afternoon Streatham worked in the yellow wheat-fields under the burning sun; until at evening Sally gave her final orders to her men about the morrow, beckoned him, and they started together across a clover-field. They crushed the lush leaves under their feet as they walked, the air was full of the fresh, sweet fragrance of the pink

clover heads, the sun was slowly sinking behind the low-lying hills, and stretched over the fields in long, level bars. Some of Sally's Alderney cows, sleek, dun-colored creatures, walked past them down a narrow lane between two fields.

"Aren't they pretty?" said Sally lovingly, leaning against a fence post covered with delicate flutings of pale green and orange lichens.

"Sally, I wish I could paint. I always wish I could paint when I look at you," stammered Anthony. "Hebe!"

"Do you?" asked Sally idly. Her eyes were first on the other side of the lane, where the wind gently stirred the broad, shining blades of corn. The sun was sinking very low behind the hills, and soft, purple hazes were beginning to float over the fields.

"Sally," whispered Streatham breathlessly.

She turned and for one long moment they looked deep into each other's eyes, that full gaze of self-revelation, glorying in its emotion, leaping to the full expression of it. For that one moment they stood thus, their eyes revealing, questioning, then Streatham's arms were about her, his lips on hers.

"It's an old, new dream come true. I—I love you, Sally."

And Sally, the world forgetting, the music of the spheres in her soul, the fields grown dim before her eyes, had thrown her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek closely against his.

Across the meadows there rose and fell the sound of singing; a far call of melody, as if blown from the heart of sunset, crystal-clear, unearthly, sweet as the horns of elf-land. And Sally felt Streatham start and listen. He lifted his head, his arms relaxed their clasp of her.

"It is Hilda Hurd, singing," she said.

"It's a skylark. 'Hail to thee, blythe spirit,'" he muttered. "What a quality—disembodied, lyrical!" His arms had fallen. All of his senses seemed concentrated into hearing, so intensely he listened. There was a strange, rapt look on his face, as if at the sound of Hilda's singing, some secret, unsuspected spring within him had been touched and he had followed, without hindrance, that call of melody across the shadowy, impassable barriers of a thousand worlds to the heart of the



sunset, where light was glory, and falling waters were shaken with music, and stars were flowers.

"She has stopped." Was there satisfaction in Sally's tones? "Come. It grows late. Why, Anthony, you look," in puzzled laughter, "you look like Rip Van Winkle just wakened from sleep."

## CHAPTER III

### A CLOUD IN THE SKY

“**T**HERE ain’t a day passes that Mrs. Salt don’t shame me some way.” Mrs. Nesbit in her usual chair upon the porch anxiously smoothed her figured silk gown and lifted faded, aggrieved eyes to her intimate friend and gossip, Mrs. Hill, a tall, stout, unwieldy woman in a black and purple print dress, swinging slowly, ponderously back and forth in a rocking-chair. Cold, inquisitive eyes shone in her large ruddy face, and she pursed a sanctimoniously held mouth and nodded emphatically.

“Sometimes,” Mrs. Nesbit continued in her high, shrill voice, encouraged by this expression of sympathy, “I feel as if her goings on was more than I could bear. I’ve always lived respectable. My folks had money. Why, my mother never went without a silk dress to wear on her back of a Sun-

day. And it seems hard, yes, it does, that I got to spend my last days with some one like Sally Salt. Why, Mis' Hill," fingering a hair brooch at her throat as if to see that it was still in place, "just last Sunday, when everybody was driving along the road to church, she walked out as bold as you please with a fishing-rod over her shoulder, going a-fishing." She glanced up at her companion out of the corner of her eye with the hurried, furtive glance of some small, timid animal.

Mrs. Hill sighed heavily and again pursed her mouth. "I put it all down to her not bein' a per-fesser," was her dictum. "Now down to the missionary meeting the other day she sent in a whole box full of clothes. They was nice, I'm bound to say it," impartially, "and the ladies was pleased. Then one of those women, Mrs. Jim Hopkins, of course, she kept going on about how good Sally Salt was and how kind and how there wasn't nobody in distress that she didn't try to help, until I was given courage to speak right up. I says, 'Yes, she does do kind-appearing things, but what good are they going to do her on the awful day of judgment? You ladies seem to forget that she ain't

never accepted religion. It ain't so bad for a man, but when a woman can't be reached by grace—' ”

She slowly shook her head as she contemplated this ultimate possibility beyond words. Then, still gazing into the pit, so to speak, her expression was gradually mollified. The vision spectacular of the final triumph of justice, including wailing, gnashing of teeth and the burning of tares, promised a comforting balance of the scales. Fired by zeal, she turned her beetling gaze upon her friend. “Mis' Nesbit, I don't see how you settle it with your conscience to stay here.”

“I—I often feel that way myself,” faltered her companion, twisting a carnelian ring upon her finger. “I once went so far as to speak to Preacher Ward about it, and he argued with me to stay, 'specially since I didn't have no place else to go, bein' as all my folks is dead. He says, 'You got a good, comfortable home here. You can do as you please, and Mis' Salt's as good to you as if you was her own mother. I don't think you got any call to complain, 'specially, as you ain't got any real claim on Mis' Salt.' ”

“Oh, he spoke real harsh to me, Mis' Hill. Why,

my feelings was so hurt that I took to my bed and cried steady for two whole days."

"I always said he wasn't fitten for the place." Mrs. Hill's simplest utterances had the quality of a pronunciamento. "He ain't the true sperrit of love. I hope you spoke right up to him, Mis' Nesbit."

"'Deed I did." Two bright spots of color glowed on the faded cheeks. "I told him I felt I had a perfect right here, that Sally was 'most engaged to my son Clarence, who died in this house, and that made the place sacred to me; but," her complaining little bleat ending in a gasp, "it's awful hard sometimes. Just look at them lazy cats, five and six of them sunning themselves on the front porch like it belonged to them and dogs chasing all over the place!"

"And don't forget"—Mrs. Hill was not one to forbear piling Ossa on Pelion—"and don't forget all the trash she's liable to pick right up off the road and bring in, so's you never know whether you're sleeping under the roof with a murderer or an escaped lunatic."

Mrs. Nesbit shuddered, but her mind was still too much occupied with Sally's detestable pets fully to contemplate this suggested possibility.

"One day," she shrilled on complainingly, monotonously as a cicada at noontide, "after I found one cat asleep on my bed, and was kept awake the whole night by another jumping in and out of the window, I got my spunk up, and I says, 'Sally, if you had any respect for me, Clarence's mother, you wouldn't ask me to live in a house that's 'most like a institution. Why, if my mother thought I was livin' in such a place, she'd turn in her grave.' She was a terrible proud woman, Mis' Hill, and no one had a better right. She was born a Hoskins. But Sally, she didn't pay no more attention to me than she does to anybody, just laughed and teased me."

Mrs. Hill shook her head. "As I come past the orchard, I saw Sally and Lucy Parrish and a man. He was lying on the ground under the trees, and I couldn't see him very good, but it didn't look like John Witherspoon. I suspicioned that it was that Streatham that comes here every summer. It's about time for him, ain't it?"

"He came yesterday," replied Mrs. Nesbit. "I will say for him that he is quite the gentleman."

"I'm the last one to hear gossip, let alone repeating it," Mrs. Hill arched her chest virtuously, "but



all the ladies at the missionary society seemed to be talking about them."

"She's got a plenty beaux," admitted Mrs. Nesbit vaguely.

"Huh! Course she's got 'em, thick as flies around molasses; but I ask you this," folding her arms across her bosom, "how many do you think she'd have if she was as poor as you and me? If Sally Salt hadn't her good big farms, how many men do you think would be clustering about?"

"I don't think many," doubted Mrs. Nesbit. "I don't think gentlemen, as a rule, fall in love with ladies so much like themselves." She smoothed back her hair consciously. "Who's that coming in the gate?"

Both women craned their necks to see, but the girl who had slipped through the gate, after one hesitating glance toward the house, a glance which discerned the two occupants of the porch, hastily sought shelter behind a group of shrubbery and trees, and, with the idea of concealment evidently in mind, made her way toward the orchard as rapidly as her circuitous path permitted.

In the center of a little clearing in the orchard,

Sally stood in a pool of morning sunlight, hatless, her blue cotton gown open at the throat as if her vitality craved and exulted in its warmth and splendor. On the brink of shadow, Lucy Parrish, delicately tinted, daintily modeled—the embodiment of Spring at its exquisite, fugitive perihelion—faced her, only to be dominated and eclipsed by the summer of Sally.

At least, that would have been the general opinion; but one man would have stoutly held out against it for ever. That was John Witherspoon, who lay along the grass at Lucy's feet, and like herself well within the zone of grateful shade. He was a tall, well set-up man nearer forty than thirty, with brown, smooth hair beginning to show gray, and calm, sincere brown eyes which looked out pleasantly upon the world. One glance was usually sufficient to convince most persons that he was one of the most likable and dependable of human beings.

Sally was casting screenings in broad, sweeping handfuls from a pan held in the crotch of her arm to a great flock of industriously pecking chickens, snow-white Leghorns, gray speckled Plymouth Rocks, buff cochin-chinas, while tiny yellow and

white chicks struggled through the long, seeding grass in obedience to a motherly cluck, and fluttered their bidding wings about a platter of warm cornmeal mush at her feet.

Anthony had perched himself in a crotch of a tree, and choosing to play the part of sister Anne in her watchtower, was announcing the cloud of dust and the flock of sheep in their chronological order with dramatic fervor.

"Here's a beautiful cloud of dust," he announced. "Alas! it resolves itself into a lady whom I remember perfectly, but whose name I can not now recall."

Lucy languidly turned her head. "It is Mrs. Meecham," she said.

"Mary Meecham," commented Sally. "Mary is literally swamped in marriage. She used to be very fond of games, and as girls, she and I were always playing checkers or backgammon or chess. Well, the other day I went to see her, and noticed the chessmen on the what-not looking kind of lonesome and dusty. So I said on the spur of the moment, 'Come on, Mary, let's have a game for the sake of old times.' 'No,' she shook her head, 'Albert doesn't

care for games. He thinks they are a foolish waste of time, so I've given them up.'

"That's the way most women do and they don't get a mite of credit for it. In most cases Albert isn't even aware of the burnt offering."

"Oh, Sally, Sally," sighed Streatham, "here comes David Pearson riding along on his old brown nag. His mouth has a grimmer set than it ever had before; he would willingly convince you of the error of your views and the proper place of woman in the home.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, "play make-believe long enough and it's sure to come true. Here's some one coming in the gate. Why, I believe it is Hilda Hurd. Yes, it is. Sister Anne must now descend from the tower, passing as she does so from one incarnation to another, progressing from the inferior feminine thought to the superior masculine, and as Anthony Streatham, greet the—what shall we call her—elusive Hilda."

Sally's face had clouded a little. "I can call publicans and sinners 'brother' without a qualm," she remarked abruptly, "but fools bother me."

"She evidently means you, Lucy," said Anthony,

"for manifestly I can not run the 'pub' where sinners congregate, and wear motley at the same time."

Witherspoon laughed. "You're too modest, Tony," he said lazily. "We who know you believe that you are quite capable of playing all three parts, publican, sinner and fool."

"Has Hilda done anything with her lovely voice, Sally?" asked Lucy, before Streatham could answer.

"No, the mother won't hear of her leaving home to study."

"But we ought all to do something about it, really, we ought—" Lucy spoke with conviction—"such a voice as that shouldn't be lost here in the country."

"Well, I can't do anything about Hilda's voice now, not this morning. Harris is occupying my thoughts at present, and something must be wrong with him. Look how Hilda is hurrying."

Indeed Hilda was almost running. She had come across the green, old orchard, between the rows of gnarled, bent trees with their low boughs thickly rosetted with gray, green leaves and hung with green globes of fruit beginning to show faint, red stripings. But now, as she reached the little group,

she paused warily on the very edge of a pool of sunlight and drew back a little into the dim, pleasant seclusion of shadow.

A little, pleased smile dimpled her cheek for the moment at Anthony's greeting, and then she turned anxious, frightened eyes to Sally. She was a slender, tall creature with an appealing face full of pathetic charm. Her hair was of an ashen fairness, her eyes were wide and blue, the features delicate and indecisive, and the skin was of the exquisite, pale, pinkish yellow of the tea-rose. There was nothing distinct nor definite about her beauty. It stole upon the beholder now and again in a wistful glance; it revealed itself unexpectedly in her moments of pensive reverie, and even expressed itself in the soft, fluttering vagueness of her manner, or the tender, longing appeal of her smile.

"Oh, Mrs. Salt," she cried as she came near, hands on her panting chest, her flute-like voice broken by emotion, "won't you please come and see if you can do any good? Harris has been crying all morning for you, and mother wouldn't send. They are trying all kinds of remedies on him, and



people are driving in from miles around and sitting on the porch."

Sally's glance flamed; then, as suddenly, her face set, revealing its square, indomitable outline. "Anthony, you had better come with me," she said decisively. "You're more popular there than I. Lucy, you tell Wilmerdine to get the little room next to mine ready for Harris." Her orders were sharp and crisp. "Come, Hilda, I'll go with you now."

"No, no, no!" the girl shrank and wavered. "Please do not. I wouldn't have any one know I'd come for all the world. I'll run across lots and join father down in the meadow. You won't tell I came, will you, Mrs. Salt?"

"My patience, no," said Sally, but with impatience. "Go the back way, front way, any way you want." She strode herself, with the free movements of a winged goddess of Victory, hatless, out on the dusty highway in the glare of the hot, high sun.

## CHAPTER IV

### BEYOND THE HILLS

AS Sally and Streatham took to the highway, Hilda Hurd ran like a fawn across the orchard and out through the meadows. She skimmed a field or two without pausing for breath, skirted the back of a house, and finally joined an old man who stood with his arms folded on a stake-and-rider fence. A strong resemblance proved to the most casual observer the relation existing between them, that of father and daughter. His features were more delicately and decisively cut than hers, but this may have been due to the fact that hers were blurred in the soft and indefinite outlines of youth, still innocent of the sharp chiselings of time and experience.

His hair, thick and white, was tossed back from his brow, a long white beard swept his chest, prophet-wise, and his eyes, wide and vague as

Hilda's own, with the same oddly luminous quality, were fixed on the low line of hills, unsubstantial, almost floating in their pearly hazes of distance. Both face and figure showed a finish, almost a fastidiousness of modeling which his coarse clothes could not conceal, nor the evidences of toil obliterate.

Years before, his young imagination inflamed by Horace Greeley's advice, he had adventured from New England, to seek that vast and virgin land of opportunity—the West. But while crossing the hills of the middle country he had made one of the occasional and leisurely halts with which it had pleased him to break his journey from its start. This time it was at the cabin of a "mountaineer," and, lingering there a few days, he had fallen in love with the handsome dark-eyed daughter of shiftless, illiterate parents.

The capital which Hurd possessed to invest in life consisted of his striking good looks, some education, and a little money, the latter an unguarded and undefended treasure, a honeycomb gnawed by the foes of his own household. And these foes were a childlike credulity, an open hand for all who

asked, and an implicit and obstinate following of his most fantastic impulses. As for the girl, she was just a degree above one of the most definitely defined castes in America—poor white trash—but she was handsome, she was vigorous, she was ambitious, a quality alien to her class and people, and probably bequeathed to her by some remote progenitor; and she saw in this weak, beautiful, dreamy youth an opportunity more golden and concrete than any he had visioned in his splendid, romantic West.

Her conquest was an easy one. For the first time he encountered in visible form the dream of man—woman, the world's desire. In that first ecstasy of meeting, he crowned her with stars and wreathed her with the scarlet blossoms of his young heart; but not for long. For him the Venusberg was the most illusory pageant of this world which he had known always, though still vaguely and inarticulately, as the valley of illusion.

His marriage was inevitable, and barely accomplished when his wife persuaded him to renounce his further adventuring and to journey no further in search of a land of snow-capped mountains of

gold, of fertile, illimitable plains, of eternal summer, and wonderful painted fruits, with the smiling Pacific Ocean purring at its shores. She knew of rich bottom lands, of farms of an excellent yield nearer home. So they journeyed to a neighboring state, the money was invested in the ground she coveted, and Maria Hurd prepared to enjoy the long, fat years stretching before her, to give free rein to her ambition, to acquire, to hoard, and to extend her holdings; but as those eagerly anticipated years went on she was forced to reckon, ever more bitterly, her gain as loss. She learned to know that the strength of the weak, the defense of the defenseless, often lies in a peculiar elusiveness. So, she found it. Hurd, her man of straw, had a pith to him which rendered him more unresponsive to her influence than a strong and positive nature could possibly have been. That conflict of strength with strength would have meant, from the outset, the clash of wills and the gradual capitulation of the resisting one to the more imperious and powerful force; but in this case the will was not resisted, it was evaded, and Mrs. Hurd found that she might as well try to mold water, to break the bending

withe, to order the wind, as to manage her husband. The real strength of his nature, more or less quiescent and hidden in youth, but which was destined inevitably to leaven the whole lump of him, was mysticism. He was past his wife's crude comprehension, as well as her patience. Gradually, and with increasing resentment, she grew to regard him as not only shiftless, but, as she expressed it, half-cracked, and to put him to what poor uses she could.

But even so, they failed to prosper. Hurd, who had in some way succeeded in retaining his property in his own hands, occasionally took a keen and disastrous interest in various land deals, trades and bargains.

This morning, however, he did not turn from his rapt contemplation of the far horizon as Hilda halted beside him, one hand upon her panting chest.

"Mrs. Salt will soon be here, father," she cried. "She and Mr. Streatham came the roadway."

Her father did not answer nor give any indication of having heard her. His gaze remained fixed on the hills.

"Did you ever get to studying about what lies beyond the things you see, Hilda?" he asked.



"Those hills, do you mean?" She looked at him in surprise. "Why, you know what is behind them, father, as well as you know what is on this side."

"I don't mean that," he said patiently. "What is the matter with you, Hilda? You are usually quick enough to understand. I mean what is beyond that, and then what is beyond that. What is always behind that which you can see and know. That is the thing that keeps me guessing all the time."

But Hilda could not soar with him above the dust of earth, not now, at all events, when her heart was torn with anxiety. The strongest need of her nature was to minister to those she loved. Having, as her mother frequently and scornfully phrased it, "taken after her father," she was inefficient in Martha-like service and was yet ignorant that Mary had anything to give, so that her soul, troubled by her ineptness, a subject for frequent discussion and habitual reminder, quaked and feared and leaned heavily upon the strength of others.

"But, father," her voice was not impatient, only plaintive, as with detaining, drawing hands upon his sleeve she strove to recall him from his far world

of dreams, "father, what are we going to do about Harris if Mrs. Salt isn't successful? Mr. Grisson," a delicate flush rising on her cheek, "has tried and tried, but it's no use."

"Oh, Harris!" He pulled his arm away as if her touch stung him, and drew his toil-worn hand across his brow, a shiver of pain contracting his sensitive face. "You know as well as I do, Hilda, that we can't do a thing." He twitched his shoulders in irritable shame. "Why," with a touch of violence, "don't you let me get away and forget it?"

"I wish you would take me with you," she said forlornly.

He looked at her in wonder, even a faint contempt. "Anybody can go that's a mind to," he said. "It's a free country. I've got no keys to it. That's it, Hilda; it's free." His eyes shone with a peculiar inward light; his face was irradiated. "And there's everything in it. Why, Hilda, I can spend all day picturing just what might be behind that one lone hill yonder."

His daughter gazed at him with a wistful, half-proud expression, but almost for the first time without a spontaneous and understanding sympathy.

Usually she was his joyous and eager companion in what was to both of them the realm of the real. To-day she could not journey with him. She shook her head dejectedly, one or two tears ran down her cheeks, but she wiped them away, and after a moment or two of her usual indecision walked toward the house.

The Hurd home was an humble and unpretentious one, set in the midst of a beautiful and fertile country. Back of it rolled the low hills and before it stretched broad, well-tilled fields, now ripening for the harvest. The house itself was a one-story cottage, with a sagging porch running the length of it. A group of men and women sat on the one low step of the porch, for the most part silent, although there was an occasional effort at more or less laconic conversation.

"Has he begun to bark yet?" a woman in a calico wrapper and a slat sunbonnet asked presently.

"No," said one of the men, looking up and shifting his quid of tobacco to the other side of his mouth; "but he's refused water twice this morning."

"Is that so?" Eagerness colored the woman's drawling tones. "Well, I guess he'll be beginning

soon, so we might as well wait. My! The neighbors have turned out, haven't they? Look at that string of buggies hitched to the fence! Well," with a long sigh, "I s'pose it ain't no more'n right that we should stand by each other at such a time, and show sympathy."

"That's right," agreed one of the men heavily. "But it's harvestin', you know. I hope he won't keep us all day."

"Say!" The woman shielded her eyes with her hand. "That surely ain't Hurd down there by the lot?"

"Yes, it is." The man spoke contemptuously. "What'd you expect? He ain't got no more sense of hospitality nor what's fit and proper than a yearlin' colt."

"Who's this comin' down the road?" the woman asked. "The sun's in my eyes, and I can't see for the dazzle."

He ran his thumb over the stick he had been whittling, as if to test its smoothness, and then looked up. "Blest if it ain't Sally Salt; and, yes, I do believe she's got that Streatham with her."

"What's she up to now?" wondered the woman.

"Lord knows," piously. "And I guess she keeps Him puzzling most of the time," he chuckled under his breath.

Grissom, who had been standing with his back to the paling gate, stood aside at the sound of footsteps, then, turning, gave a slight start as he beheld Sally and Streatham.

The two men regarded each other fixedly for a moment, a strange smile on each face.

"Ah—Grissom," said Anthony, halting an appreciable second before the name. "How did you happen to discover this out-of-the-way corner of the world?"

The other had recovered himself by this time, and spoke with a touch of defiance.

"Think I heard you mention it once, if I'm not mistaken," he replied, "as a nice, quiet place to take a rest."

In the meantime Sally, oblivious to the interlude, had pushed on through the gate.

"Good Heavens!" She turned to Grissom, as the three walked together up the path bordered by Hilda's flowers. "Look at all these people!"

"Yes," he replied, "they've been driving up for

hours. Personally, I haven't been able to do a thing; but I'll back you up, Mrs. Salt, to any extent, if that will be the least assistance."

"It may be," said Sally serenely. She viewed the group on the porch with a sort of laughing scorn, nodded to them, and then passed on, without knocking, into a low, narrow room. It was illy lighted by one small window, and, coming in from the broad sunshine, Sally for a moment or two could distinguish nothing, but as her eyes became accustomed to the shadow she could see that it was filled with women and a few men. In the center of the group, with a clear space around him, sat a slight, delicate lad of ten or eleven years. His face was very pale, his mouth drooped piteously, and there was an expression of terror in his eyes. He turned his head a little as Sally entered, and the expression of satisfaction which had dawned on his face at the sight of her deepened to happiness when Streatham followed her.

"Tony!" he cried in shrill, tremulous joy, and stretched out his arms.

As if summoned by those childish tones, a woman came forward from a doorway at the back. She



was tall and large of frame, taller than Sally, and her face was like granite, set and square. Her smooth, perfectly unwrinkled skin showed none of the etchings of age, but had retained a noticeably firm texture, indicating her impassive disposition. The dark hair was, in contrast, thickly sprinkled with gray, and the eyes were black, murky and unfathomable. Her voice was as suave and smooth as her slow smile, but it held none of the refinement that was inherent in the tones of both Hilda and her father.

Sally, and indeed most of those present, had a sense of something lacking or missing about Mrs. Hurd. She did not seem entirely to complete the outlines of their customary mental picture of her, and few of them paused to consider that this was due to the absence of "Trip," an aged, woolly, black dog, and her invariable companion. He was the only object for which she ever showed the least affection, and was now securely locked up, lest an over-wrought public sentiment, at present inimical to dogs, might demand his sacrifice.

"Howdy, Mis' Salt," she said civilly. "Won't you take a chair?"

"No, I thank you, Mrs. Hurd. I just stopped for a moment."

"Thank you, Mis' Salt. My neighbors certainly have been kind; but seeing that I've always had to bear my burdens and responsibilities alone, I guess I can keep on doing it to the end. I ain't much afraid of responsibilities." She spoke with meek humility.

The conversation was polite, apparently friendly; yet the stolid, weary, sallow people leaned forward expectantly. The atmosphere was charged with electricity. It was combat now, and every spectator responded to this new demand upon their waiting interest. For the moment the cause of contention, the pale, delicate boy, was forgotten. The prolonged, fluctuating excitement of waiting for the manifestation of symptoms which should thrill them to the center of their sordid beings and afford them infinite opportunities thereafter for dramatic recital and portrayal was, for the moment, eclipsed by the cyclonic Sally, who had more than once hurled herself menacingly, even devastatingly, across their skies.

But the irresistible force met the immovable body,

and in the first clash the irresistible force proved unequal. Mrs. Hurd had the advantage. It was hot, high impetuosity against unyielding imperturbability. Sally lost ground inevitably, for she lost her temper. It would have served her cause better could she have played the diplomat; but she was of the soldierly temperament, and went bluntly to the heart of the matter.

"Mrs. Hurd," Sally's voice rang positively, "I want Harris to come to me for a few days. It is absolutely necessary to get him away from here." She looked in bright scorn over the group. "All this noise and excitement is enough to throw a perfectly well child into convulsions."

There was a slight, quizzical contraction of Streatham's brow; he gave a faint, characteristic twitch of his shoulders, as if too late he realized that he and not Sally should have managed this affair. He had been kneeling on the floor beside Harris, talking to him and examining the wound upon his leg. Now he looked up with his most ingratiating and winning smile.

"The wound really amounts to nothing, Mrs. Hurd," he said, "but, after all, a little change

wouldn't be a bad thing. It's good for all of us now and then."

"Ah, yes, let him come to my house for a few days," urged Sally, who had realized too late that high authority and command were not methods which could prevail with Mrs. Hurd.

The woman looked from Sally to Streatham and back again. There was no change in her set face, but there was the swiftly extinguished flash of a hard triumph in her murky eyes.

"Well, he can't go," she said, with a sort of passive definiteness. "He's my child, and I have a right to his last moments."

"But there need be no last moments, Mrs. Hurd," Sally of the high command still controlled herself to plead.

"Oh, mother, let me go!" Harris lifted his voice in timid, childish appeal.

At the sound of the unmistakable longing in his tone, her face set more grimly than ever, but she made no answer to his plaint, nor did she reply to Sally directly. "Nobody shall deprive me of my child at such a time as this," she spoke without passion, but with an impersonal, fanatic force.

Audible approval of this sentiment rippled through the room.

"See," one of the women spoke up eagerly, "he can't even look at that pan of water. He keeps a-turning his head further and further away from it, as if something was drawing him."

"That's so," a man corroborated her.

"Fools!" breathed Sally, with sapphire lightnings of the eyes.

"That's my brother, Mis' Salt," Mrs. Hurd's voice was lifted in humble reproof, "and he's acting according to his lights."

"I'm sure of it," Streatham spoke with cheerful haste, before Sally could reply. "But Harris and I are planning to go fishing. We promise to bring you a string of fresh fish every morning. Ah, come, Mrs. Hurd, do not deprive us of that pleasure." Anthony was to his utmost persuasive.

Maria Hurd looked at him steadily, with no expression in her unreadable eyes, and yet there was apparent a firmer set to the jaw. Then, after her fashion, she dropped her eyelids.

"You may mean kind, Mr. Streatham, and Mrs. Salt may mean kind," submissively, "but if it's the

Lord's will for my child to get well, he'll get well, and if it's the Lord's will for him to die, he's goin' to do it under his own mother's roof and under his own mother's care."

Streatham turned away with a slight, hopeless shrug of the shoulders. But Sally was not yet discouraged. She was looking beyond them all introspectively, her sight turned inward, and meanwhile she bit her red lower lip. She realized with a disgusted impatience of her own blundering that she had made a mistake in her approach of Mrs. Hurd, but she still did not contemplate failure. It was as impossible for her to leave that boy in that house as it would have been to abandon a kitten starving by the wayside, or a fledgling fallen from the nest. She was of the soldierly temperament, true, but she was also a woman. Therefore the arts of the diplomat were not altogether unknown to her, and she meant to reach Maria Hurd, but how, how?

She bent her eyes upon the sister who so mightily withstood her. Mrs. Hurd stood calm, indifferent of scrutiny, her eyes, as usual, cast down, and Sally's glance tore at her, keen to miss no meaning expressed by the flesh. She knew, intrepid Sally,



that she must agree with her adversary quickly, that she must pierce this hard impassivity to the very springs of motive, and while she scanned and studied she marshalled in her mind and pieced together all that she had ever heard or known of Maria Hurd. She remembered—ah, it came, the clue for which she had been waiting! Her nostrils quivered, her eyes widened for the fraction of a second.

“Mrs. Hurd,” she said, “will you come out into the kitchen with me a moment? I want to speak to you alone.”

She led the way herself through the open door and down a step or two into a small, neat kitchen. The older woman hesitated a moment, and then she followed her willingly. More pleadings? Well, it was good to see this proud, successful Sally Salt vainly abase herself.

Sally closed the door carefully, thus shutting out the eager peering faces behind them.

“Now we can talk,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Look here, Mrs. Hurd! Harris isn’t going to die. Let him come and visit me for a week or two.”

And now Mrs. Hurd stood no longer with broad calm eyelids lowered, but gave Sally Salt the full

benefit of her inscrutable gaze. To do her justice, the woman had been perfectly sincere in her use of primitive remedies, and in her belief that Harris was better at home than among other surroundings; but, in spite of her unyielding attitude, she was yet more or less impressed by Streatham's opinion that the boy's injury was slight and that he was not in the danger her neighbors and friends would have her believe, and this morning her opposition to Streatham and his suggestions had really been opposition to the opulently arrogant Sally Salt.

So now the moment was doubly sweet and must be prolonged. Sally Salt should beg and beg, and in vain. So she shook her head without speaking, yet not too decisively. Imperious, imperial Sally must be kept on her knees, figuratively at any rate; must plead further.

But to plead wearied Sally. She took or she let alone. It was the moment for trumps. She played them. Her voice was as crisp as a flail.

"Let me take Harris with me this morning, and I'll give you—twenty-five dollars."

At her words Mrs. Hurd's whole face changed. The fixed, immobile mask broke up, melted, flowed

into expressive life, repulsive in manifestation, but vital at last. Under the domination of her secret passion, her tall figure became supple and subtle; it leaned, yearned toward Sally; the long, fleshy fingers curved inward and clutched. A moment of revelation of her hidden and consuming hunger, then she regained her immobile, granite, self-control.

"Thank you kindly, Mrs. Salt, but I couldn't think of it for a minute." She shook her head.

Sally waited.

"Of course," Mrs. Hurd twisted the corner of her apron, "unless you get the doctor to take all responsibility, and tell folks that he literally ordered Harris off."

"Oh, he will," Sally assured her easily, "and you can tell them that he ordered and I coaxed until you just had to give in."

"M-m-m." Mrs. Hurd was a picture of meek resignation. "But not for twenty-five, Mrs. Salt. That wouldn't—"

Sally was ruthless. "That or nothing," airily. "You can't raise me that way. Twenty-five or nothing."

The adversary sighed. She recognized defeat, and wasted no time in debate. "And the money, Mrs. Salt?" the finger-tips curled involuntarily, desire flamed in her eyes. "Do I get it right off?"

"This minute." Sally lifted the skirt of her gown and from a pocket in her petticoat took out a flat, brown pocket-book. "There," counting out the bills. "Now for Harris."

## CHAPTER V

### ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

MRS. NESBIT and Mrs. Hill sat upon the porch patiently awaiting Sally's return. They were quite capable of sitting there indefinitely, if there was even a faint show of a bit of news.

They were, however, rewarded before noon by seeing Sally and Harris and Grissom drive up. Grissom had calmly borrowed an old white horse and an equally ancient buggy of Mr. Hurd, and Sally had gratefully accepted this means of conveyance rather than expose Harris to the glare of the noonday sun. Although the little boy shrank nervously against her and clutched tight both her gown and her hand, his face had lost something of its pallor and its piteous expression of fright.

"There," said Sally, after she had thanked Grissom and she and the child had passed through the gate, "now run, play and explore. See, here is one of my kittens," picking up a little gray fluff-ball.

"It has a hurt paw, and can't walk about and see things. Suppose you carry it about to get the air, and when you both get tired of that, come back to me and we will find something else to amuse us." She placed the kitten carefully in his arms, and he started off on his journey of inspection.

"How d' do, Mrs. Salt?" Mrs. Hill spoke with a punctilious politeness which conveyed, without subtlety, a reproof. "Isn't that little Harris Hurd?"

"It is," said Sally laconically.

"Well," Mrs. Hill settled herself in her chair, "I stopped in there this morning, just to show that I thought of them. It's been a solemn time for Harris and his family, and the neighbors certainly did show their sympathy. Everybody seemed to feel that it was their plain duty to go and help the Hurds bear their burdens."

"I assure you they were doing it," said Sally dryly. "Oh," rising impatiently, "half the mischief in the world is caused by the missionary spirit, and most times it's just plain meddling. It's a blessed privilege to bear your own troubles; it's the only way to learn anything, and I'll thank any one to leave me and my troubles alone."



"Ain't you peppery, though!" commented Mrs. Hill.

"Sally, Sally, you, who were born for deeds of mercy, to talk so," laughed Lucy Parrish, who had just strolled up.

"It's my form of dissipation," groaned Sally. "I suppose I hate the meddling spirit so because I've got it. Makes me think of my old grandmother. She was a lively old lady, spry as a cricket, and always managing and bossing her own and every one else's affairs; but when she got to be about eighty years old she said that she had lived a long time, and that she had always observed that those who received special consideration in this world were those who reached out and grabbed it. She said that she had always missed the petting and the coddling the weak sister gets, because she had spent most of her life in the engine-room oiling the machinery, and it got so that everybody finally took it as a matter of course that the engine-room was just about the fitting place for her, and that the wheels went round without friction because it was their nature to, and no one even gave her credit for the free use of oil.

"But she said—my grandmother did—that it's a law of human nature that every one has to go off on a spree now and then. She said, 'I don't care what kind of a spree it is, whether liquor or religion, an orgie's an orgie; and the orgie I want is the satisfaction of seeing folks wait a bit on me before I die.' So she took to her bed, saying she was old and weak and had earned a rest, and she guessed her time had come, and she'd probably be bedridden and helpless for the rest of the little life that remained. But, goodness, how she made them work! She kept one of her daughters that had been used to sitting all day in a chair and just about embroidering her life away, reading hymns and novels to her all day long; and another one, that was continually gadding about, she kept running up and down stairs bringing her this and that from morning to night. They tried every way in the world to rouse her. One of the girls would say, 'Mother, the house needs cleaning dreadfully,' or 'Somebody ought to be making the jelly,' but the old soul never turned a hair. 'I can't be bothered with such perishing matters,' she'd say; 'I got my immortal soul to think of.' And the preacher would tiptoe in and pray, and

friends would bring her the news and a little jelly, and she said for the first time in her life she felt important.

"Well, house-cleaning, or bad cooks, or moths in the carpet, couldn't feaze her; but at last something did. She said to her daughter one day, 'What's that I smell?'

" 'It's the wood fire that's been built in the back yard so's we can boil the soft soap.'

" 'Who's a-stirring of it?' said my grandmother.

" 'Henry,' answered her daughter, mentioning the handy man.

" 'Oh, Lord!' groaned my grandmother, 'and he's no more use than my foot. Raise me up on some pillows so's I can see how it's going,' she ordered.

"Well, the next thing they heard was a scream—'He's letting it boil over!'—and before they knew it my grandmother had streaked down those stairs in her nightgown and was out stirring the soap.

"Of course, after that she couldn't take to her bed again. It was the engine-room and oil-can for hers. So," concluded Sally, smiling down humorously at Lucy Parrish, "you see, I come naturally by my bossing. Why, here's Harris again!"

The little boy ran down the path to her and hid his face in her dress, shaking with nervous fright. Sally stooped and put her arms about him. "I smell cookies in the oven," she cried, sniffing the air. "Let's go and see if Aunt Mandy hasn't some ready for us—lovely little brown ones. Come on, Lucy, we are going to play for the rest of the day."

Mrs. Nesbit clutched Mrs. Hill's knee. "Did you see him?" her teeth chattered. "And she brought that child here with no thought of me. How—how soon, Hetty Hill, how soon do you think he'll begin to bite?"

"From the looks of him, I should say any minute." Mrs. Hill rose and seized firmly a large black umbrella which she carried as a protection against the sun. "I'd try not to be too friendly with him if I was you. They say they often turn on their best and dearest, and yet you can't tell. I've heard just as many tales about their taking spite out on those that don't notice them. You can't tell about it; you've just got to leave it in the hands of the Lord. Who's that a-coming?" looking down the road. "Oh, it's that Streatham. I never did have any use for him, so I guess I'll get out of the way quick.

Why do you suppose he didn't drive home with Mrs. Salt?"

Streatham indeed had been loitering by the way for purposes of his own. He had remained at the Hurds' for a season, talking to old Mr. Hurd, and had then slowly sauntered along the highroad, quite aimlessly to all appearance. Half-way to Buckeye Farms he had thrown himself under a large tree and lay there in the shade, gazing about him with contented and lazily observant eyes. There he lay, enjoying the panorama of nature, until old Fanny, the Hurd horse, ambled into sight. Then Anthony rose and, playfully imitating the manner of the professional highwayman, held up the conveyance, and, inviting Grissom to take him a drive, stepped into the old buggy while it was still moving.

Grissom laughed a little, grimly, cynically, amusedly and comprehendingly. "I bet I can guess why," he said.

"You're so modest," remarked Anthony. "You always think people have some ulterior reason for seeking your society. It was, I remember, a marked trait of yours even in boyhood."

"I've had reason to think so," grinned the other

man, although still grimly. "But what's the use, now, Streatham? In the first place, it's none of your business, although I know that that fact won't keep you from meddling in anything you choose."

"Why should you wish to deprive me of the exercise of my profession?" said Tony sadly, "especially when it's the only one I've got. And you must admit that my meddling is ever actuated by a desire to do good to others."

"It looks as if you were about to depart from that straight and narrow path in this instance, then." The other man spoke dryly.

"Again you do me wrong. To tell the truth, I don't care for anything that hasn't a spice of danger in it, and I've lived long enough to know that the most dangerous thing in the world is to meddle in other people's affairs, especially when you're trying to do them good. Can't you see, then, the almost irresistible fascination it has for me and the value of my present renunciation?"

Grissom gave him a long and rather puzzled look. "Then what is your game? If you're not here to—to—"

"Rescue Red-Riding-Hood from the wolf," sup-

plemented Anthony. "No, that wouldn't interest me. For all I know it might be one of those matches made in heaven."

"But that's your game, Tony; you can't throw me off the scent, or pretend it isn't. I've got intuitions; have to have 'em in my line. I suppose that's the objection—my calling? Isn't that the name the preachers give their trade?" with another of his mirthless smiles.

"Well," Streatham had been occupied in getting a light for his cigarette, in spite of a rather strong breeze, and, having succeeded, he leaned back and again gave his mind to the subject in hand, "admitting that that is my game, I am not playing it from the conventional and usual motives that you are mentally imputing to me."

"What other motive could there be?" asked Grisom with the slightest of sneers.

"Oh, bah! Don't talk rot. What does interest me is this: Can the waste of a rare and lovely thing be prevented? Is such a thing possible in this world of chance and mischance? There's a wonderful career stretching before this country Red-Riding-Hood. She has a voice of a quality that's



known only to the angels in Heaven, and there is some strange temperament behind it. I can not tell what is is, Grissom; I can never define it even to myself, hard as I've tried. It escapes me. It will escape you. But what will be left of that voice and that career if you drag her through the mud?"

"Another jeer at my calling," with his harsh laugh. "And I thought your objections were not the usual and conventional ones."

"Bosh. I care nothing about the ethics or philosophy of this thing, Grissom; I'm discussing practical issues. I've got a belief—don't know whether there's anything in it or not—that a great gift always carries with it its terrible first commandment. It speaks insistently to its possessor, 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me. You must worship me, love me wholly, serve me entirely. Seek your happiness in other paths, and I send my lightnings upon you, starve you, burn you, freeze you.' I believe that any one who has a voice like Hilda Hurd's must crave more than anything else the perfect expression of it. You know that your—er—calling is fraught with peculiar dangers; an accident disastrous to your career may occur at any moment.

Then what about *her* career? The woman who lives with you and cares for you, no matter if she condones your method of life or even approves of it, is nevertheless under the strain of a ceaseless fear and anxiety, and when you consider what that would mean to a nature so abnormally sensitive as Hilda's—"Anthony flicked his cigarette into the roadside and turned heatedly to his companion. "By God, man, who are you to deny the world the joy of that voice? Association with you, Grissom, can't help but take the unearthly, sexless rapture out of it."

Grissom also turned. There was one swift, dangerous gleam in his eye; then his face set like stone. "Look here, Streatham," he said, "that's all right enough, and maybe true enough; but you're no fool and you're no hypocrite. Neither am I. Now, I've thought about everything you've said, a good deal longer and a good deal harder than you ever have. But she will probably fall in love with some one. She will probably marry some one. Then why not me? You know I don't think that I am any worse than most of our prominent citizens, or even than the average business man; and, cards on the table,

Streatham, I love her and she loves me. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. Not a damn thing, Grissom. It's on the knees of the gods now. Pull up old Fanny and let me get out."

## CHAPTER VI

### A WILE OF SATAN

“**A**NNE is coming; she’s quite sure of it this time,” said Lucy Parrish, walking into Sally’s kitchen the next morning. Sally was making jam in the big, cheerful room with east windows which admitted great patches of sunlight.

To think of Sally was to picture her moving in sunlight, encompassed in its glow and radiance. Her kitchen was her pride; it had need to be large and well-equipped, fitted with all modern and labor-saving devices, for it fed many in the course of a year.

Wherever it was possible Sally had white tilings, and wherever it was possible she had copper vessels, and the sunshine dazzled over the floor and white copper-hung walls and over Sally’s copper head and white dress, and threw into splendid ebony relief the figure of “Aunt Mandy,” with her red and yellow bandana twisted about her head. She was

standing by a table kneading bread and crooning camp-meeting songs under her breath, while Sally bent over a great kettle of jam on the stove.

Through the open window came in wafts the faint, pungent breath of thyme, for the kitchen looked out upon its garden of supplies—parsley-bordered beds of aromatic herbs, the clear little artificial stream, its sides bordered with cress, wonderful blue-green cabbage heads, rows of springing corn, tomatoes turning red in the midsummer sun, bean vines in long festoons over their poles.

“What is it?” said Sally absently.

“Anne really wants to come,” repeated Lucy, agrieved that her tidings of woe should be so indifferently received.

“Well, let her come.” Sally continued to skim her kettle of black, bubbling fluid, puffing out its rich fragrance in gusts of steam. “Harris is all right this morning, and that’s such a relief that I could welcome the devil himself.”

“The devil would be a lot more interesting than Anne.” Lucy’s tone was still disconsolate. “I could forgive her anything but her cheerfulness at the breakfast table.”

"The breakfast table's a mighty good place to keep quiet at," said Sally absently, leaning over her bubbling pot. "There's more murder committed in the heart at the breakfast table than anywhere else. It takes a strong constitution to stand up under too much cheerfulness at the wrong time."

"But can I not write her that she mustn't come now?" pleaded Lucy, "that Mr. Streatham is here now, and consequently there will be no room for her?"

"You can do as you please," said Sally, never lifting her eyes from the pot, although a deep flush, the flush which the mention of Streatham's name always caused, spread even to her brow. "Ah!" with evident relief as the door slowly opened and there peeped in a pretty mulatto girl, Aunt Mandy's daughter, and a maid in the house. She was a small creature, with an exquisite figure and a bewitching face, demurely daredevil; her skin like cream, deepened to a sweep of warm, dusky shadows about the long odalisque eyes and in the faint hollows of her throat; her mouth was as full and scarlet as a pomegranate flower, and her coarse, heavy hair lay about her head in black, shining waves.

As she had nothing to say, apparently, Sally asked, with the touch of relief still lingering in her tones: "What is it, Wilmerdine?"

"Nothin' 'tall, Miss Sally," she drawled in her soft voice. "I just wanted to speak to mothah."

"I don' want nothin' to say to you," returned Aunt Mandy with cold obduracy, "a gal dat's actin' like you is!"

"What's Wilmerdine doing now?" asked Sally with an indulgent smile

"W'at she doin' now? W'at she doin' now? Ain't she always in mischief?" asked her mother shrilly. "Well, now's de worst yit. She's done took up with Uncle Poodle, dat's w'at."

"Uncle Poodle! What on earth do you mean?" Sally straightened up and ceased to give the jam her earnest scrutiny, transferring it instead to the pretty, sulky creature lounging in the door. "Why, Uncle Poodle is at least sixty-five years old!"

"That's it!" said her mother still more wrathfully. "Here you, Blossom!" aiming an ineffectual kick at a fleeing gray cat. "I'll break a broomstick over yo' back 'fore yo' know whar you at. Yas'm. Here she's got her pick of all de young fellows



around. Smaht, likely boys, an' she drap de whole of dem to run after a old wuthless ape like Uncle Poodle."

"Uncle Poodle!" The jam boiled over, but Sally stood transfixed, spoon in air. Before her eyes rose the vision of Uncle Poodle, old, ugly, bent with rheumatism, ever grumbling, playing Corydon to this airy Phyllis.

"She natchally can't let nothin' in trousers alone, dat girl!" Aunt Mandy threw another baleful glance at Wilmerdine, who, with shoulders raised and a half-deprecating, half-sullen smile at the corners of her mouth, still leaned against the lintel. "Blossom ain't de only one dat'll have a touch of de stick across dar shoulders," threateningly. "I ain't raised dat gal right, Miss Sally, an' I's a-payin' for it. Ain't you seen how de beds is half made and de rooms half swep'? Dat's her. An' ain't you seen how de gyarden look, de flowers not half watered, de grass dryin' up? 'Cause why? 'Cause every time Uncle Poodle try to work, she's a-callin' to him and a-chasin' him. My Lawd!" with a vicious slap at the mass of puffy white dough on the board.

Sally had by this time regained her composure. "What's the attraction, Wilmerdine?" she asked briskly.

The girl looked at her, a slow gleam in her eyes, as if laughter lurked somewhere behind the surface.

"He's got somethin' the boys ain't got, Miss Sally. 'Sperience."

"'Sperience!" broke in her mother hotly. "'Sperience in rheumatics and shirkin' his work."

"And does he return your—your interest?" Sally again assiduously skimmed the jam.

Wilmerdine looked down and then up. "No'm, he ain't," a secretive, conscious, triumphant smile about her lips, the gleam in her eye feminine, inscrutable, deepening. "That is, he ain't—yet."

"Wilmerdine!" Sally reproved now, "why are you trying to turn his poor old head and make him unhappy? I never thought you capable of such vanity. Why, it's wicked."

Wilmerdine, petted and unused to reproach, pouted. For the first time she essayed a defense. "It ain't vanity, Miss Sally. But Uncle Poodle, he ain't never speak to me, or so much as look at me, and when I try jus' to say a word to him in passin'

now an' then, he jus' look over my head an' say, 'Go 'long, gal. You ain't nothin' but a wile of Satan.' That's what he call me, Miss Sally, an' I ain't goin' to have nobody speakin' to me that way. I'm goin' to show him."

"And when you do turn his head, which is exactly what you set out to do," Sally spoke plainly, "what then?"

But Wilmerdine shrugged her shoulders irresponsibly. That was for the gods to settle.

While Sally had lent ear to Aunt Mandy's complaints and exhorted Wilmerdine, Lucy Parrish had slipped through the door and into the kitchen garden, and thence had wandered on through Sally's bright beds of flowers, and it was there that John Witherspoon, who had come riding down the road from his own adjacent property, found her.

"You look like a peach blossom in that pink frock," he said as he stood, tall and sedate, awaiting her between two great tubs of blooming oleander, which, in a way, marked the entrance to the garden. "But your face is a study for Melancholia. What is it?"

"Anne," said Lucy tragically. "She's coming,

and Sally won't say she shan't. If I'm a study for Melancholia, it's Anne, and—and other things."

The garden afforded delightfully cool spaces, and it was in these shaded alleys that Lucy and Witherspoon loitered, where the trees spread a dome of green, sun-transparent, above them, and the emerald moss unrolled its encroaching velvet carpet over the damp paths. On either side there were ferns and those flowers which bloom and grow in cathedral seclusion. Out where the sunlight fell intermittently the day-lilies spread their broad, shining leaves, the long, pointed white buds gleaming through them like snow, and fuchsias swung their richly-hued bells, purple and scarlet; but entirely beyond the shade, free of it, were courts and mazes of color, poppies that pitched their crinkled, silken tents of a day; nasturtiums, flame and gold and scarlet—Parsees worshipping the sun and reflecting its glow; geraniums, heliotrope and mignonette, and beyond them, in the aristocratic reserve and seclusion they prefer, roses, a garden of them.

"Now, tell me," said Witherspoon, pausing in the path, "why you look a little sad and pale this morning. That is not all Anne?"

"It's my frock; pink takes the color out of me," began Lucy bravely; then her lip trembled, a tear stood in the depths of her dark eye. "Life wears on me," she said, lifting her childish gaze to his. "It seems so—so monotonous."

"Monotonous! With Mrs. Salt?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, Sally! Sally's a strong breeze that blows from the north, south, east and west; but she's—oh, she's a she." Lucy sighed again. "You remember Kipling, don't you? 'A woman is only a woman; but a good cigar is a smoke.' Well, I want whatever is the symbolic equivalent of a smoke. It means to me all the things I've missed in life. Why, I've never had any of the experiences most girls have. I was barely out of my teens when I was married. He was nice and kind and took me about the world and gave me a lot of pretty things—and then died and left me a load of money and you my trustee. Oh, I know I ought to be ashamed of myself, ever to grumble. Sally tells me so, frequently. I dare say," she admitted candidly, "the truth of the matter is that I have too much time on my hands."

"In other words," looking down at her tenderly

and laughingly, "you are badly in need of an interest in life."

"Just so," she assented eagerly, her mercurial temperament responding to the suggestion in flushed cheek and sparkling eyes, "but it must be a nice interest, not just a plain, ordinary one, but a vivid, iridescent one, with lots of color and excitement."

"A romance," he suggested.

Lucy caught at the words. "That's it. A romance. I'm twenty-five years old, and I've never had one in my life, anything even approaching one. But,"—with a suddenly falling face, "you can't have a romance without a man, and there are no men here."

"There is myself," said Witherspoon modestly.

"You?" To Lucy's annoyance her eyes faltered and fell, her laughter rang false. "But that is impossible. You are my trustee."

"You say it as if you meant executioner." Witherspoon could not keep the amusement out of his tones, and yet his smile was rueful.

"Nonsense!" Lucy endeavored to explain. "You catch up one's words so. But you must admit there doesn't seem anything very romantic about a trustee.

Now," petulantly, "stop laughing. You have no right to take things personally. I am speaking of a trustee in his official capacity."

"How does an executor seem to you?" asked Witherspoon. They had left the shaded alleys now and were strolling through the sun-lighted, deliciously fragrant rose-garden. Lucy had unfurled a sun-shade, pink as the petals which strewed the path.

"Oh, an executor! Well, purely in his official capacity—you mustn't take this in a personal sense, remember—he seems a sort of cross between an uncle and a private detective."

"Have I impressed you that way?" the amusement in Witherspoon's tones was almost obliterated by anxiety and dismay.

"Oh, don't be absurd. Of course not. I was speaking of trustees in their official capacity, you remember."

They had reached an old rustic seat at the end of the garden, and now they sat down. Lucy tilted her sunshade over her shoulder so that it cast rose reflections over her gown and face, the wind blew among the roses, scattering the petals over the grass,



blowing eddies of white and pink and crimson at their feet.

"Look here, Lucy Parrish," said Witherspoon, as if just struck with a new idea, "as a trustee, who is really a more decent creature than you imagine, my aim is to gratify your wishes as far as possible. Now you are longing for romance. So since the circumstances of the case prevent your having a real romance, why not amuse yourself with an imitation one. Pretend for the next few months that you are living a romance and that I am the hero of it."

Lucy, eternally feminine, with the heart of youth, looked at him as a child gazes at one who has proposed a new and fascinating game.

"But I have known you so well and so long. Would it be possible?" she doubted naïvely sincere.

"Oh, quite simple, truly," Witherspoon's tone was gravely reassuring. "You have only to pretend hard enough. I know I'm rather old, almost forty, and a little stiff in the joints for a Romeo, but I haven't forgotten all the rules of the game, believe me."

"But it mustn't be any staid, middle-aged romance," insisted Lucy anxiously. "I want the fool-

ish, delightful kind that Anne would want if she were anywhere near her own age."

"I understand," he again reassured her, and Lucy, since she did not look up, saw neither the laughter nor the tenderness of his eyes. "Who is that?" he leaned forward, hearing the click of the gate.

Lucy, too, bent forward. "Oh, it is Hilda! She has come to see Harris. Is that that Grissom man with her?"

"Yes, and not a proper companion for her, I'm sure, by Jove! He does look a bad customer—that fellow."

Hilda lingered at the gate, wavering back and forth, uncertain in her anxiety to go and her desire to remain. And Grissom, who stood on the outside of the closed gate, resting his arms nonchalantly on the top bar of it, while he held an earnest conversation with the girl, was surely the antithesis of her ethereal, wind-flower beauty.

Now, although she had advanced and retreated, and looked up and down, and shaken her head in dissent and nodded it in affirmation, he had not changed his position, nor withdrawn his eyes from her face, until he succeeded in winning from her the

answer he desired. Then he lifted his hat in punctilious courtesy, replaced it and turned to go.

Little Harris had by this time seen his sister, and he ran down the path to meet her, flying a kite behind him. Hilda stooped and put her arms about him, kissing him, and laughing and crying over him at the same time. Then together they walked to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Hilda," called Sally, who was filling jar after jar with rich jam, so fragrant that a bee or two had buzzed through the window in an adventurous quest for this new and delicious odor.

"Oh, Mrs. Salt!" she cried, "isn't it splendid to see Harris as he is this morning?"

"Indeed it is, Hilda. By the way, you had company as far as the gate, didn't you?"

Hilda's eyes wide and luminous met Sally's tranquilly. "Yes, Mr. Grissom. He was telling me that he's going away for a few days."

Sally straightened herself up from the jam-pots.

"You're a pretty girl, Hilda," she said, coolly surveying the fawn-like creature from head to foot, "an awfully pretty girl. You can pick and choose, if you want to marry; but don't be economical in

your beaux. Have all you want about you, but don't confine yourself to one, yet a while. I just saw the other day a terrible example of the senselessness of economizing. Now, I stopped in to see Susan Fink a minute, and I was no sooner seated than she asked me what was my especial economy. I told her I hadn't any. I was entirely too busy to economize. Once begin that sort of thing and it gets such a hold on you that you can't think of, nor do anything else. You just spend all your time studying about that. Now, there's Susan Fink. If the angel Gabriel would offer her a corner lot in Heaven, she would say: 'I haven't got time to listen to you. I've got to study how to get a patch on this old, worn-out apron, so's it will last a week or two longer!' Oh!" Sally was her impatient self now, tossing her red head. "People are always drawing long faces and saying that other people don't know the value of money. There's such a thing as having entirely too much reverence for a dollar. We worship it a lot more than we ever do God. But it's just the same with men. Have all the beaux you want, Hilda, but don't get economical about them. It don't pay to be stingy in that respect."

## CHAPTER VII

### MRS. HURD GOES HALVES

**T**WILIGHT was dropping blue veils over the hillsides, and the white mists wavering up from the valleys met and mingled and melted into that mysterious and light-holding gray which lies between the afterglow of sunset and the dense blackness of night; a solemn and tender shadow which blurs the color and outline of beauty, effacing the cruder graces that the inner and spiritual meaning may be manifest; and which also enfolds the sordid and commonplace until the whole landscape becomes a monotone suggesting loveliness without contrast.

Hilda Hurd was out in the soft dusk watering her flowers, making endless journeys to an old wooden pump at the side of the house, and returning with her watering-pot running over, for her flowers drank water thirstily during these days of hot July sunshine. She was singing half under her

breath, as she worked, a curious little minor song with a soft, reiterated, falling refrain. Mrs. Hurd, a composed, almost granite figure, sat in a large creaking rocking-chair on the porch, resting after her day's toil, while Mr. Hurd, always restless as night drew on, wandered up and down the road. He finally disappeared, and Hilda, among her tall, velvet-petaled hollyhocks, after casting an anxious glance about for him, paused and listened intently, peering down the highway. Satisfied, apparently, she stood irresolute for a moment, and then, as if going for another pail of water, picked up the rusty pot and walked swiftly and quietly behind the house.

From the clump of trees opposite the garden, which stretched away into a belt of woodland, there came at rhythmic intervals wafts of cooler air, as if the earth were breathing out again the freshness of the morning; now and again a bird woke and twittered sleepily, the croak of frogs in a meadow pond rose clear and shrill, the night-blooming flowers, beloved of the moths, began to open their starry cups, and now Mrs. Hurd was the only human figure in the landscape, gazing before her with ruminative, inscrutable eyes as if engrossed in some inward cal-

culations, unmindful of the mystic moment when day gives full place to night, and gathering her half-lights and gleams, speeds to a further dawn.

Presently the gate clicked, and the solitary woman of the porch bent forward to see who was the occasion of this notification of arrival; and then a slow, satisfied smile spread over her features. Leisurely, big of frame, the county sheriff, Jake Washburne, took the narrow way between Hilda's flowers, which he so far overtopped as not to see them, a stolid, powerful, heavily-built man, with a broad, deeply-tanned face, small, quick-moving blue eyes and a mouth thin as a gash.

"Good evening, Mrs. Hurd." He sat down heavily on the steps without awaiting a request to do so.

"Good evening, Jake," with as much cordiality as it was possible for her to express. "Here, take a chair. Don't sit down there."

"This is good enough for me," he said indifferently. "I don't want a chair. Where's Hilda?"

Mrs. Hurd looked about her, surprised not to see that the girl still watered her flowers. "Why, she was here just a minute ago. She can't be far. Shall I go and look for her?" half rising.



"No," he shook his head. "Wait a minute." He sat in silence for a few seconds, then drawing a cigar from his pocket, he bit the end off of it, and forgetting to light it, sat twisting it about in his fingers, as if engrossed in some new thought. At last, recalled to himself, he drew a match from his pocket and lighted the cigar and puffed at it two or three times, as if not fully ready to speak.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Hurd waited, manifesting no impatience. Mrs. Hurd had not an impatient nature. She could always afford to wait.

"No," he took up the thread of the conversation where it had broken off after this period of cogitation on his part and acquiescence on hers. "Don't call her. It's better not. I came on purpose to see you to-night, not her. That's unusual, ain't it?" with a short laugh.

Mrs. Hurd smiled quietly and smoothed out her apron, but said nothing. Why even momentarily deflect the course of a confidence or a revelation by an excursion into the vague inanities of politeness?

"Yes," he took his cigar from his mouth and spit on the ground. "Yes, I'm glad Hilda ain't

around. It gives me a chance to talk over some things with you that have got to be talked over."

Mrs. Hurd continued to smooth her apron. Her eyelids were lowered, her mouth complaisant. In effect, she purred. A homely group in a humble, even sordid, environment, and yet it stood for an eternal, human picture, a mother bending ear to the hopes and fears of the eligible suitor; the priestess of a daughter's destinies, with the symbolic fan in one hand and the vessel of cold water in the other, ready at once to fan the flame of his ardor, if necessary, or to quench it should it flare to such high confidence as to threaten indifference.

"Yes," and honey and butter melted together in her tones, "yes, Jake."

He puffed exasperatingly at his cigar, trying even her patience. He was only quick when his hand was on the trigger. At last he removed the cigar from his mouth and glanced cautiously about him. "Mrs. Hurd," carefully lowering his voice, "where's Gris-som?"

It took a good deal to startle Mrs. Hurd, but so sharp and unexpected was the question, so obvious was its effect of some sinister and underlying mean-

ing, that it might be said she almost jerked from her attitude of ear-bending, maternal solicitude, to one of startled and alert attention with its immediate and skilfully suppressed hint of "on guard" about it.

"Grissom?" she repeated, her suave and stony self again. "Of course, you mean Grissom that takes his meals with us. There ain't any other, I guess, around here anyways. Why, he's off somewheres for a day or so. He'll be back Tuesday."

"Sure?" the question was as sharp as the report of a pistol.

"Of course." She looked at him curiously. "Didn't Hilda get a letter, this morning, saying so?"

"And he said he'd sure be back on Tuesday?" with an increasing and eager insistence. "He didn't have any suspicions?"

"Suspicious?" she repeated. "Do you mean about you and Hilda?"

"Lord, no!" with a gesture of impatience. "What do I care what he thinks about that? Look here, Mrs. Hurd," he put his hand in the breast pocket of his coat and withdrew it empty, "I couldn't show you in this light," he glanced up at the moon, which was just rising, a great yellow disc above the trees.

"Let's see, can you bring a candle out here? And say, Mrs. Hurd," as she got up from her chair, "just look about a little, will you, and make sure that Hilda's no place about; and if she is can't you send her over to a neighbor's a minute on some little errand or another?"

Mrs. Hurd nodded without speaking and went into the house. For a moment or two her heavy voice might be heard calling: "Hilda! Hilda!" but there was no response. Then she tried the fastenings of some of the windows, closed a door or so and reappeared, holding a lighted candle in a black tin candle-stick. She was shielding the flame with one hand and it threw white, sharply defined reflections on her impenetrable, cold face and across murky eyes.

Washburne made a place for her on the step beside him and she sat down, holding the candle in her lap, still carefully shielding the veering flame.

With another glance behind him toward the open door at his back, he again thrust his hand into the inner pocket of his coat and drew out a folded newspaper. Slowly, he unfolded it, and then by the light of the candle he pointed out to the woman beside

him a smudged half-tone, which might easily pass for a portrait of Grissom.

"What do you think of that?" he asked triumphantly.

She bent above the paper and studied it in every line before she answered. "That's him, sure," she lifted her head and spoke with final conviction. "But, Jake, what does it mean? What's he been doin' so big that he's got his picture in the papers?"

"Nothin' very strange about that," Washburne spoke with a rough indifference plainly affected, "seein' as he's one of the best-known green-goods men in the country. Why, he's just gold-bricked a rich farmer in Missouri, him and a pal of his. Got fifteen thousand dollars out of the old man. According to account, he seems to be a general, all-round, high-class crook. What was that?" he cried sharply, his eyes on the open door yawning black in the whitewashed wall.

"What?" she asked impatiently, half-rising.

"A kind of a long sigh. Made me shiver. Sure there's no one there?"

"Sure!" her impatience more marked. "Wasn't I all over the house? The windows and the back

doors are all locked. No one can get in without my hearing them. I'll go and look again, if you say so, but it's the wind, I tell you."

"There ain't a breath stirring," he affirmed incredulously. "No, it wasn't that. Oh, well, I guess 'twas nothing, after all."

"Of course," she agreed contemptuously. "But do go on."

"Well, to-day I got a letter from the chief of police up in the city, saying they had reason to suspect that Grissom was somewhere about in this locality, and giving a description of him that fitted him to a T."

Mrs. Hurd still continued to study the newspaper portrait. "It says here that his name's Curtis Hammond,"

"Just so," he replied in tones of easy sophistry. "You don't suppose Grissom's his real name? He's sure to have a baker's dozen of 'em. But it's him. You can bet your last dollar on that. All you got to do is to look at him to know he's a crook. Of course, feeling as I do to Hilda, it wouldn't have done for me to mix in before, with nothing to back me up," deprecatingly, "but I always felt, Mrs.

Hurd," now in tones of admonition, superior, easy, "that you weren't right in takin' him in like you did and lettin' Hilda see so much of him. I don't suppose his flashiness made much impression on her. Hilda ain't that kind. Still, it was taking a risk. Yes," shaking his head as if over danger averted by the merest scratch, "it was certainly taking a risk. What did you know about him?"

She glanced at him sidewise out of her dull, contemplative eyes, as if his moralizing roused in her a sort of slow, indifferent scorn. "What did I know about him? Nothing except that he put up his money; that's about the only recommendation that particularly interests me." For a moment she studied the moon-lighted path before her, her jaws working slowly, as if she chewed her words before uttering them, then she turned on him, a flush on her cheek and a smoldering fury in her eyes.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow, Jake Washburne?" and all the sleekness that usually oiled her voice had vanished. The tones were harsh and sharp as a bark, malevolent as a snarl. "Just because—because you're jealous of Hilda with Grissom, you go hunting up crazy resemblances in the news-



papers. Hilda!" This sordid and brutalized Martha flung out her whole, secret, invincible contempt for the Mary she had borne. "What you or Grissom either see in her!—" She stopped abruptly, restored to caution. "Look here, Jake," her voice again showed the use of oil, it was explanatory, ingratiating, "you know as well as anybody what I've had to do on this farm; I'm not only the head, but the hands of it. You know what a daft fool Hurd is, and as for Hilda," again she checked herself, "Hilda ain't much more than a child. Well, you know that besides the farm, I make something taking in mealers. My cooking's well known, and if I do say it myself, it deserves it; but of all the summer folks that's ever taken their meals with me, no one has ever paid me the prices that Grissom has. City prices, Jake, city prices!" There was pathos in her voice. "And then you come—" her accents broke in bitterness.

"Wait a minute," said Washburne, spreading out a hand toward her, explanatory, soothing, almost shaking concessions from his broad fingers and great flat palm, "there's a reward offered. If this

is the man, and of course it is, and I can get him, and of course I can, I get the reward."

"A reward!" Mrs. Hurd, who had descended into the grave, arose to new and vital life. "A reward!" she cried, "a reward, Jake!" Her long, fleshy fingers closed over his arm, pressing deeply into his hard muscles. "How much?"

This was Washburne's moment, and he allowed no undue haste to destroy the fine flavor of it. He cast his eyes moonward and appeared to calculate, while the clutching fingers on his arm increased their tension. "Let—me—see," he dragged each word to its full length, "why—it's—just—twenty-five hundred dollars." He endeavored to keep his voice down to matter-of-fact level, but it broke its tether in spite of him and soared.

"What!" it was a low, almost breathless gasp from his companion, "twenty-five hundred dollars!" The sum received from her its due meed of reverence. Then its contemplation stirred cupidity and cupidity induced action. "Give me that paper!" She almost tore it from his hands and desperately scanned it.

"And you're going to get that money?" Her eyes held a fierce awe.

"I was calculating to. That's always allowing that things go right," falling into the racial superstitious deference to the powers of darkness. But in spite of this propitiatory humbleness, his voice sang triumph.

The smooth, cold surface of her face broke a little and hardened again. It was as if she had repressed a smile.

"Oh, I guess not, Jake, I guess not," and mild and soothing as her voice was, it held the cold steel of conviction which sent a chill of apprehension over him. "I guess it ain't feasible. Hilda's the only one that knows his address, and if she should suspect that you're after him, and a reward, she'd have word to him before you know it."

He gave one brief, contemptuous chuckle and looked at her with surprised amusement. Was this the woman that a moment before had almost frightened him? Why, she was straw. "You can't play any games like that," he said coolly. "Neither you nor Hilda will ever have a chance to get word to him. You'll both be watched from the minute I

leave here. I planned for that. I got a man waiting to go on duty, down the road a piece." He jerked head and thumb in the same direction.

Mrs. Hurd pressed her lips together and brooded moodily for a moment. Then her face lightened and she smiled benignly on him.

"How do you think Hilda will feel toward you, Jake, when she learns that you trapped Grissom and took the reward? Hilda likes Grissom mighty well. Don't make any mistakes about that, Jake." She softly patted his arm.

He looked at her a moment without any particular expression on his face, studied the woman with whom he had to deal and the question between them, turning both over in his mind as he chewed a fresh cigar.

"How's Hilda going to know anything about the reward?" he asked.

"Because I shall tell her all about it, Jake." Her smile made her cheeks look like thick, wrinkled cream.

Washburne rested his elbow on his knee, propped his chin on his hand and gave the moon his keenest scrutiny.

"Supposing," he said at last, "that you and I do the trick. You keep Hilda in the dark about it as much as possible, and if she does find out anything make it seem like it was a sad duty forced on me by my position. It's got to look like I was acting reluctant."

"Yes, Jake," gently, "I understand. And we go halves on the reward."

"Halves!" he repeated blankly.

"Yes, halves," the iron broke through the smooth texture of the velvet now. "And I want your agreement to that in writing to-morrow morning, Jake. Don't make any mistake about it; it's halves or nothing."

## CHAPTER VIII

### STREATHAM TELLS A STORY

LUCY PARRISH ran down the path to meet Witherspoon at the gate. The great yellow moon was sailing through a sky mysteriously blue, the air was sweet with all manner of night fragrances; but it was the face of tragedy that Lucy lifted to his.

"Anne's here," she announced without the formality of a greeting.

"Anne?" even the composed Witherspoon looked blank. "When did she come?"

"This evening. And now," Lucy was almost in tears, "we can't have any more fun playing at romance. She'll know. Some way or other, she will discover it. She always finds out things, that is, things you are particularly anxious that she shouldn't."

Witherspoon pondered. Inspiration came. "But

don't you see," taking her hands in his, "that that adds just the proper element to the romance. It makes it twice as interesting if we have to elude her, throw her off the track all the time. Why, Anne, for purposes of romance, can be any number of persons; the duenna who must be evaded, the tyrannical relative who seeks to part us—oh, all of the well-known fictional characters. Truly, Lucy, I see possibilities in the situation."

Lucy brightened with one of the lightning changes of her mercurial temperament. "I hadn't thought of that," she cried.

"Aunt Lucy! Aunt Lucy!" a voice from the porch.

Lucy crouched against the gate-post. "H-s-sh! h-s-sh, don't answer," she whispered. "But she will come anyway. She'll find us," despairingly.

"She will not if we are not here," said Witherspoon decidedly. "Come," with another inspiration. Witherspoon always rose to executive heights under stress of emergency. "Come, we'll row up the river."

"And get some water-lily buds!" cried Lucy eagerly, slipping through the gate. "And then I can



see the lovely things open in the sunshine to-morrow morning!"

They took a narrow path along the edge of a field of whispering, rustling corn, and then, when Witherspoon had unmoored the boat, floated out on the moon-lighted river.

"Oh!" said Lucy with a sigh of content, settling herself back comfortably against the cushions, "this is delightful. What do you suppose Sally and Anthony Streatham are doing this evening?"

"Sitting on the porch, probably, or in the garden. They are living the real romance, not playing at it." A shadow fell across Witherspoon's face.

"But this is the real romance," expostulated Lucy, "the beautiful moonlight, and the water all flooded with it, and the deep, mysterious shadows on the banks. If only—" Her face fell a little.

"What?" asked Witherspoon.

She hesitated.

"If only I were a more romantic figure. Do not be afraid to say it, Lucy. But do you not see, my dear, that here, as in the case of Anne, you have to exercise your imagination? Our romance is largely constructive. It isn't exactly spontaneous, you

know, because it involves the will to be romantic. Therefore, the more you use your imaginative fancy the better. Now, you've simply got to see me as a romantic object, no matter what your reason tells you."

"It wasn't that so much," Lucy hastened to explain, "as that it seemed only half a feast. Here is moonlight and a boat, and I look rather nice, do I not, with this mantilla over my head?"

"And I only am out of the picture," said Wither-  
spoon, with a touch of his dry, quiet humor.

"But you're not," quickly denying his statement. "You're quite in it. You look so dark and distinguished and reserved."

"Thank you," he managed to achieve a bow. "Then what is bothering you? What is lacking of a whole feast?"

"Several things. Music, and—"

"But, Lucy, I couldn't touch the lute and row too. And if I sang it would drive all thoughts of romance out of your head."

"But poetry." Lucy advanced this tentatively. "You could recite things."

"Mm-m." He rowed silently for a few minutes.

"Go on," urged Lucy encouragingly. "You have such a lovely, deep voice, that I am sure you recite beautifully."

"But I don't know anything," said Witherspoon. "I can't think of a thing."

"Oh, but there are such lots of things," sighed Lucy. "*The Last Ride Together*, or *By the Fireside*, or some of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the one beginning 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.'"

Witherspoon shook his head. "I can't do it, Lucy. I don't know any poetry. I," desperately, "always hated it; and now I can't think of a thing but *Woodman, spare that tree!*"

Meanwhile, as Witherspoon had predicted, while he rowed Lucy through the moon-flood, Streatham and Sally sat on the porch together; the rest of the household had gone within, and Streatham sat on the step below Sally, with his cheek against her arm. For a few minutes there had been an unusual silence between them, and then he lifted his head, sniffing the odor shaken from the insignificant green bells of a night-blooming jasmine by a wandering breeze.

"Sally, what is that fragrance, blown straight in

from dreamland, which, combined with your presence, makes me realize that, as Em-Emerson says, 'Life is an ecstasy, or it is nothing'? It is an ecstasy to-night. Look at the moonflowers opening their big white cups like angels' trumpets. S-Sally, darling," with a long sigh of content, "this is one of those seasons that only say, 'Live and rejoice.' "

"But all seasons say that," returned Sally simply. "To live is to rejoice."

"Ah, Sally," he caught her hand and ardently pressed his cheek to it, "that is what distinguishes you from the rest of this dolorous world which takes such pride in its dolor. It's the joy in you, Sally—the joy that springs from some inner, inexhaustible source, from the deep hidden founts of being, some unspoilable harmony of nature."

"Everybody would be as happy as I am," said Sally, "if they were equally well and strong and had as much to interest them."

"Do not dream it." He shook his head positively. "It's not a matter of a strong body; it's the eternal health and youth of the spirit expressing itself."

"Tony, you use a lot of big words," Sally announced from her higher position on the top step,

her chin comfortably cupped in her hands. "But the real reason that so many people don't enjoy life is because they're always planning to do so. Prudence and forehandedness have been so drilled into us that we don't dare enjoy ourselves until every detail is arranged so that we may do it properly, and then we don't care anything about it. It makes me think of the time I went to Europe. I, too, would be forehanded and prudent. Everything was all planned on schedules, and it came out just as it was planned. And, Tony, the horror of that visit hangs over me yet. I had arranged just what I was to admire and enjoy, and when the time actually arrived to do so I'd feel like a clam, or as if I were dead and looking on a scene which held no further interest for me. Then I'd stick the spurs deep into my poor paralyzed emotions, but even that wouldn't draw blood—just a little water." She grimaced at the remembrance, and then joined in Streatham's laughter.

"I do not believe you," he insisted obstinately. "Nothing could damp your ardor. Why, Sally, your joy is a crucible, and into it I cast all my cynicisms and unbeliefs, evil thoughts and deeds, and

behold, they are transmuted, glorified into the most beautiful and enduring illusions."

"Where did you collect all those cynicisms and unbeliefs, Anthony?" she asked. She lifted her chin from her hands and looked at him earnestly, interestedly. "Be frank, for once, if you can, and tell me something about yourself."

"Psyche!" he murmured, his mouth twisted in its most whimsical, cynical smile. "Bah! the drop of oil fell on my nose," wrinkling it up and rubbing it violently. "And it burns, Sally, it burns."

"What are you talking about?" She looked at him perplexedly. "Oh, you're trying to torment me. Your eyes have that Satanic gleam in them which always comes when you try to tease and mystify people. But, Anthony, seriously, although you talk, talk all the time, you never really tell anything about yourself. Think of it! You have been coming here for three years, and I know very little more about you than I did the first day."

"Thank you." He drew off from her and pulled an imaginary forelock. "You remove far from me the taint of provincialism. In the world, Sally, the really cosmopolitan world, people never talk of the

vain and passing illusion of their outer lives. And you know the inner me, Sally."

"Do I? In your own words, Tony, do not dream it. But your silence on that one subject, yourself—goodness knows you're not silent on anything else—is uncanny. It makes you seem so mysterious. Didn't you ever have a mother, Anthony, or a home?"

"‘Oh fair, green-girdled mother of mine!’" a little bitter, far-away smile on his lips, "early, I sought that fair, green-girdled mother of mine, ‘mother and lover of men, the sea.’ And for a home—why, my home is in your heart, Sally."

She smiled her warm, enfolding smile. "But a real home, Anthony; didn't you ever have one? Don't you ever want one?" Pity and incomprehension mingled in the tones of Sally, born homemaker.

In the moonlight she could plainly see his eyes, eager, tired, restless, and the lines seemed to deepen in his haggard face—a face as fascinating and changeful as that of the only mother he claimed.

"Oh, Sally, you do not begin to know the vagabond call of the blood," stammering in his rapid



speech, as he always did when interested or excited. "You've never known the irresistible lure of life, the curiosity that stings, the zest that burns. Life's a cruel mistress and a sweet one, sweeter than honey. She'll mock and flout you for many a mile, and then she'll relent and walk with you a bit, and slip her hand in yours, and throw her silvery mist of enchantment over all the earth. Sometimes she sings her siren song of far waters, and no matter where you are you've got to go, and then, when she's got you out of sight of land she'll toss you a whiff of balsam, a breath of pine, and there's nothing but the woods for you, and you follow her there. But after a while she makes you feel the nightmare of the forest silence, the horror of isolation, until you sicken for cities and men and women, the lights and music, the talk of the studios; and it's up and away again."

"And yet, to stay-at-homes like me I really believe that life offers more than to gadabouts like you," said Sally shrewdly.

"No matter how much it offers, you know beforehand what the offering will be," he asserted; "a damning fact, for, Sally, when I can predict with

certainly what life will offer at the very ultimate of abundance, life has nothing to offer. There must be infinite expectation and no limitation, no ties that bind."

"But—" began Sally.

"Now, stop arguing." He was weary of the subject; his mood had changed, and he shook his cigarette at her admonishingly. "We'll be quarreling presently. By the way, where is that bright ornament of the home circle, Ham—I mean Grissom? I have not observed him communing with nature about here for a day or two."

"I don't know," replied Sally. "I haven't heard anything about him."

"How does—Grissom impress you, Sally? A fine, imposing man, eh?"

Sally sniffed contemptuously. "A fine, imposing—er—er—what do you call them? A fine, imposing confidence man."

Streatham drew back a little in evident surprise. Then he cocked his head on one side and looked at her with a sort of astonished amusement. "Clever Sally!" His eyes were shining. "Well, it takes that kind to get the big money. Those who are in

effect, solid, substantial, business men, plausible, convincing, even hypnotic, yes—decidedly hypnotic.

“Speaking of such things, there was a funny game played on an old farmer in the—the West, not long ago.” He laughed in irrepressible amusement, but underlying the mirth, and qualifying it, were other emotions which infused it with a touch of resentment, a hint of chagrin.

“It happened this way—I saw it all in the papers: A man like Grissom went to a country town, remained long enough to get a good idea of the standing, characteristics and all that of the various members of the community. Then he hired a conveyance and drove to the home of a wealthy old farmer who lived several miles in the country. Arriving at his destination, he introduced himself to the old fellow as a relative of the richest and most influential families in the town, and said that he was visiting them for the present, with the end in view of buying a farm in the locality. The farmer saw his great business opportunity, and after some conversation, in which this man like Grissom—we’ll call him Grissom for convenience—succeeded in convincing him of his importance in the business world and

the value of his vast holdings, they started out together to look over one of the old man's most valuable pieces of property.

"As they were 'viewing the landscape o'er' a sewing-machine agent happened along. He was one of these audacious, impudent Smart Alecks, who, when they see two or three gathered together, simply have to butt in, an undesired but talkative third. Imagine this kind of a fellow, Sally—long, lean, lantern-jawed, a Yankee twang, chewing gum every minute and talking at the same time, always talking, talking himself to skin and bone, and every one else off the earth." Streatham was in the full tide of his story now, and impersonating all the different characters in turn, helping out his stammering speech with plentiful gesture. "By a dint of cheeky questioning the agent quickly made out Grissom's intention of buying a farm, and, without regard to the feelings of the old farmer, began belittling the property before them, asserting bumptiously that he, personally, was in the way of securing better land at a better figure. This naturally nettled the old farmer, and he and the sewing-machine agent were soon in a row, a fine, hot altercation.

"At its height the agent, swaggering, bragging, loud-mouthed, pulled a big roll of bills out of his pocket and offered to back up his pretensions by betting on the matter; flourished the roll under the farmer's nose, counted out the bills, five thousand dollars, boasting that he carried about with him more money than the farmer could raise.

"None of these nice little banderillos missed their aim; all of them stuck in the farmer's hide, just where they were meant to stick; but now the farmer was goaded to the point where he retorted that he was not in the habit of carrying all he had around with him, but if he were in town at his bank he could raise twice that amount in ten minutes. The agent sneers and at this point Grissom steps in with his little oil-can. He takes the old man aside, and after remarking that his time is too valuable to be wasted this way he says impatiently: 'This impudent, worthless fellow needs a lesson. Why don't you take him up? It's a sure thing for you. I'll drive to town with you and you get the money. He can't back down now; he's gone too far, and it's making five thousand dollars without turning over your hand. It's like picking gold off the bushes.'

“The farmer thinks this is a good plan, and they start off, the sewing-machine agent promising to await their return, and hurling taunts after them; and on that drive, Sally, dear, all of Grissom’s trained abilities, his consummate knowledge of the whole wide range of human weaknesses, come into play. The farmer is as a musical instrument to him, and he sweeps the strings with a master hand, evoking what strains he will. He dazzles, flatters, encourages the old man; praises his cleverness, and excites his cupidity, and—mark this well, Sally—never fails to give him the strong, recurring, positive suggestion that he must mention this matter to no one, that it would excite endless gossip, and would look very badly for any one so prominently connected with the church as the old farmer is to be involved in a betting transaction, and he, Grissom, would be personally deeply chagrined if such a report were circulated about him.

“Well, to make a long story short, the farmer drew the money and drove back with Grissom. The sewing-machine agent awaited them, sitting on the fence, swinging his long legs and chewing gum. His fleers and jeers were still on tap, running as

freely and freshly as water from a spigot. Then, after some preliminary arrangement, he placed his five thousand dollars in a small tin box which Grissom held; the farmer laid his ten atop of it. Grissom turned the key and then handed it, the key, to the sewing-machine agent, and placed the box in the farmer's hands. Then the old man drove to town alone to place the precious box in a safety deposit box, and Grissom and the sewing-machine agent drove off in the opposite direction to look at the farm on which the agent had the option. On Monday—this was Saturday morning—Grissom's opinion and that of several competent judges of land were to be taken, and the money would then go to the man whose claim to the most valuable land was upheld."

Here Streatham paused dramatically.

"Well," said Sally. "Well, I don't see—if the farmer's land was the best, and he had the box with the money in it—"

"That's the point, Sally. Did he have the box with the money in it? When he broke open the box Monday morning, no bank-notes began to sing



their crisp, rustling little song. The box held only worthless pieces of paper."

"Sleight of hand!" cried Sally, illuminated. "And didn't they get the men?"

It was a warm night, but a little breeze from the river swept over the garden, and Streatham shivered involuntarily. "Not yet, I believe. They are still at large," he answered.

"Oh, what a shame!"

He looked up at her quickly, but the moor had gone under a cloud, and she could not see his eyes.

"I don't like that story." Sally stirred restlessly in her chair. "It's a horrid story; all about a low trick of wicked men, and you, Anthony," petulantly, accusingly, "tell it as if it amused you, as if—well, as if you put yourself in their places and knew how they felt. I hate it. I wish— Hark!" She stopped and bent forward, listening. "Is that some one coming up the path?"

Streatham lifted himself from his lounging position and peered across the white patch of moonlight into the scented dark. "Yes; it's a woman!"

"Hilda Hurd, as I live!" exclaimed Sally. "What under the sun can she want at this time of night?"

From the shadow, fragile, ethereal as a spirit of the moonlight, Hilda drifted toward them.

"Is that you, Hilda?" called Sally.

"Yes, Mrs. Salt," was the faint, fluttering response.

"What is it? Anything wrong?" Sally's full tones promised sympathy, comfort, immediate help.

"No; oh, no. I just came to ask about Harris. I," she drew her hand vaguely across her brow, "felt worried about him."

"Harris!" Sally was astonished, even faintly impatient. "Dear me, he's all right. He's been in bed for two hours, after the happiest kind of a day." Then, struck by the weary way the girl leaned against the post, drawing deep, fluttering breaths, as if she had run all the way: "Hilda, has anything frightened you?" Again sympathy warmed her voice.

"No, Mrs. Salt." The reply was so low that it was scarcely audible. "I just stopped a moment. I must be getting back."

Sally, bewildered Sally, cudged her brains. What did this strange girl want? For what was she waiting? "Hilda," she said, acting on what seemed

to her to be a sudden inspiration, "Hilda, would you like to see me alone?"

But this suggestion served only to increase Hilda's alarm and confusion. "Oh, no. Please, please do not put yourself out at all, Mrs. Salt. I just ran in a minute to see how Harris was—I was passing—but since he is all right, I must hurry home. It is late—" She paused helplessly; her nervous fingers tore at a leaf she had plucked from the vine. "I—I did get a little frightened coming here," the effort to speak was manifest, "—if Mr. Streatham—"

"I was just about to insist on walking back with you." Streatham's voice came pleasantly out of the darkness in which he stood. "I shouldn't think of allowing you to go home alone."

With a murmur of thanks almost inarticulate, Hilda took one or two hasty steps down the path and then wavered. "Good night, Mrs. Salt."

"Good night," said Sally coldly. She sat for a moment as if petrified, then, as their footsteps died away, she rose and went up-stairs to her room. There she hesitated a moment, only a moment, for Sally's hesitations were brief, then crossed the floor and, drawing aside the curtain, glanced from the

window. Upon the road, fully revealed in the high, white light, Hilda and Anthony walked slowly, deep in conversation, and Sally noticed that Anthony's head was bent as if to catch every word; that occasionally he interrupted her, as if with rapid, excited interrogations; and that presently Hilda wavered and stumbled, and he threw a quick arm about her, and thus they stood for a moment, she leaning heavily upon him, he apparently soothing and encouraging, until she had gained sufficient strength to walk on.

"Thank you," said Anne, as she and Sally sat alone at the breakfast table. "I did not sleep quite as well as usual; my rest was twice broken. Once about three o'clock, when Mr. Streatham led a horse from the stable and down through the meadow. It looked quite mysterious, although, I dare say, was really commonplace if one but knew his motive."

Sally's coffee was half way to her mouth. She held it suspended in air for a second, and then put it down untasted.

"Why don't you ask him what the motive was?" she said.

Anne shrugged her shoulders. "Mr. Streatham is so very peculiar, and almost rude if one evinces even a polite interest in his affairs, that I think I prefer to let the matter remain a mystery."

## CHAPTER IX

### MORE OF HILDA'S SECRET

SUNDAY morning, with the unmistakable Sunday atmosphere. The very landscape reflects the prevailing relaxation, the sigh of relief that goes up from the world heart, that the world's machinery temporarily ceases and that, for one day, at least, the noisy whirring of the wheels is silenced. Then through the calm, there steals the voice of this seventh daughter who sits aloof from her six hustling sisters and murmurs: "Come ye apart. Give me this hour and I will lead you where peace floweth as a river, vision for you the city which 'lieth four-square with the twelve jeweled and mighty gates.'"

And this especial Sunday morning was a type of the perfect day, wide, white and sun-filled, when the wind seems to sigh more softly, the bees to hum more drowsily and the whole earth to lie in a soft and happy dream.

Most of Sally's family, in fact all of them, were gathered upon her broad, vine-shaded porch. Little Harris, his recent nightmare forgotten, tumbled among the cats. Lucy Parrish, in pale blue and a froth of white lace, was looking over some papers and magazines with Witherspoon, who had early made his appearance, determined to lose no moments in a strenuous campaign conducted along the lines of conventional and calculated romance. Mrs. Nesbit was in an attitude of excited expectancy. She wore a new, white-striped heliotrope gown and a white lace bonnet trimmed with sprays of heliotrope, which Lucy Parrish had recently purchased for her in town at Sally's request. Her gloves, much too long in the fingers, she smoothed nervously as she sat carefully erect, so as not to disarrange one fold of her gown; and so keenly anxious was she that the perfect equilibrium of her bonnet should be maintained that although Lucy Parrish had securely moored it to her hair with the necessary pins, she yet sat with stiffly poised head and upraised eyebrows, waiting with the fire of excitement burning in her eyes for Uncle Poodle to drive up with the surrey to convey her to church, for Mrs. Hill, as



well as others, had not yet seen her mid-summer splendors. The only bar to her complete happiness was the proximity of little Harris, who occasionally rolled too near her feet to please her, causing her to shiver afresh each time, for she still viewed him with apprehension.

Streatham, intuitive Streatham, had been regarding her quizzically for some time and now he voiced his sentiments with apparent spontaneity, choosing, perhaps, the very phraseology which would most appeal to her.

"I think, Mrs. Nesbit," slowly, to give the compliment due weight, "that I have never seen so becoming a bonnet on a lady."

Mrs. Nesbit flushed with pride; unmistakably, she bridled. "My folks always had taste," she said. "My son was a poet, an' one of my brothers was a sculptor, not professional, you know, but just on the side. He messed in clay from morning till night and was never so happy as when doing it, but," shaking her head regretfully, "he didn't get the proper encouragement from his wife. She was a Hallet, you know, and they was all hard-working folks with no appreciation. Well, once he made a

bust of her. It looked so much like her as never was, too, and he kept it for a surprise for her birthday. You see, he was out of a job at the time, and he just didn't see his way to get another; so he took the time she thought he was looking around for work and put it in on the bust, working on it on the sly out in the barn. Then, on her birthday, he had a unveiling of it. All the relatives was there, and my son Clarence read a poem, and then my brother, he took the mosquito netting off the bust, and when she saw it, what do you think his wife did? Oh, that was about the worst thing that ever happened," she shivered slightly at the remembrance, "in our family. Why," lowering her voice, "she looked at it a minute and never said a word, and then she walked out of the room and come back with a hatchet, and still without one word, she smashed the whole thing to bits."

"Interesting!" murmured Streatham thoughtfully, "a survival of the iconoclastic spirit roused to action by the personal impulse."

"I guess so," Mrs. Nesbit agreed vaguely, "must have been something like that."

"Anthony, behave," murmured Sally under her

breath, "I hate you when you play with people. She thinks you're sympathizing with her."

"So I am," averred Streatham, turning to this white-clad, red-haired, brown-skinned Sally, and speaking in a tone that Mrs. Nesbit could not hear, "but you only see one side of the question, the woman side. To her, the main facts of life are children and she seeks proper shelter for them, food for them, clothes for them and a decent appearance before the world. The husband is the mill which must grind out the grist whether there is any water to turn the wheel or not. That is his sole business in life. But think of him, poor ineffective dreamer, haunted by the vision, chained to the sordidly mundane, dismayed and overwhelmed by the responsibilities he has acquired. An equal tragedy for both man and woman, I admit; but for me, the weight of pathos tips the scales on his side. She had, at least, the consciousness of her own strength of purpose, and a sure aim with the hatchet to console her."

"What a pity that she entirely failed to grasp the art impulse which he struggled to express," remarked Anne as she rose from her chair and entered

the house. It would be impossible to contemplate Anne "saying" things; she invariably "remarked," and she never got beyond the zone of commonplaces and platitudes. Streatham always maintained that this was the curse the wicked fairy had bestowed upon her in the cradle, and her manner of stating the obvious, didactically excluding all other conclusions, made him long to smite her. He frequently confided to Sally that he never could hear Anne "converse" without feeling an itching in his right palm. He voiced this same impulse now.

"Oh, she's not bad," returned Sally, whose nerves were not on the surface, "and she's rather pretty, too."

"Rather pretty!" Anthony sulked irritably. "Oh, you women! If one of you has what you call 'a figure,' or fine hair, or a smooth skin, you pronounce her beautiful. You see nothing but surfaces; whereas, real beauty lies in unexpected intimations and revelations; a turn of the head, a momentary glance, a smile, expressing itself eternally in its suggestion of lovely and mysterious things. And Anne," with increasing irritation, "Anne suggests nothing so much as a plain brick wall. Of course,"

as if conceding a point, "all beauty does not lie in half-revelations. There's your kind, for instance—w—why, why, Sally," edging nearer to her until his sun-bleached hair almost lay against her knee, and speaking in his ardent, stammering whisper, "in that severe, white, Sunday morning frock and those smart, buckled shoes which Lucy Parrish bought for you," shrewdly, "or you'd never have them, you're as patently beautiful as the sunshine. You're like a whole meadow of buttercups. But I—I don't love you when you tell me that Anne's pretty. It—it's feminine of you, almost c—catty."

He was as irritably, perversely in earnest as if some vital question were at stake, and he sulked and glowered distastefully at Anne, who had returned and now sat perfectly erect and calm in her high-backed chair reading what he felt convinced was some instructive and profitable work.

But in spite of his animadversions and to do her full justice, Anne was not lacking in a certain sort of good looks, although it must be said that she prided herself less on being handsome than in manifesting a robust wholesomeness. "Wholesome," and "robust" were two of the most hard-worked

words in Anne's vocabulary and the two which, perhaps with the exception of "uplift," caused Streatham the most acute anguish.

But to leave the mental Anne for the moment and regard the physical—she was a rather tall, squarely built young woman, clumsily built on the whole, especially about the wrists and ankles. Her scant, dark hair was drawn plainly back from her brow, and it grew in such a fashion that it parted here and there, showing paths of very white scalp in strong contrast to her firm, red cheeks. A naturally inquiring expression was accentuated by eye-glasses, and her mouth was small and tight, with a pointed chin. Essentially methodical, she had arranged for every day a schedule of her hours from which she never on any occasion permitted herself the slightest deviation; thus, according to Streatham, successfully reducing life to clockwork.

"She's all tangled up in the limitations of time and space," he complained; "she's made of existence such a dead, mechanical thing that she's in a network of hours and minutes."

He was whispering all this to Sally, his stammer increased by irritation.

"Oh, leave poor Anne alone," she cried with impatient good nature, "and stop disturbing me." For Sally was occupied in opening and glancing over a batch of letters which had arrived the evening before and which she had reserved for her Sunday morning's leisure. Most of them were from persons desirous of spending the summer with her; but this was a privilege Sally accorded to few.

"'A lady who wants to rest and do her summer reading.'" She leisurely scanned the page before her. "What's the difference between summer and winter reading, Anthony? Oh, I see her," without waiting for his explanation, "with a whole row of imposing-looking books that she'll never peep into; and when she's ready to leave and take up her winter reading, whatever that may be, she'll present me with one of Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novels. I wonder why, when the cultured ladies want to get the heathen interested in intellectual things, they always begin with Mrs. Humphrey Ward?

"Here's another," she had run over a half a dozen in the meantime. "H'm, h'm, 'My doctor considers me in a serious condition and wishes me to go to some quiet place where I may build up—



complete nervous breakdown!' Oh, Lord!" groaned Sally, "she can't come here. I know what we would have all summer—all the great specialists in the country consulted; but none of them could tell what ailed her, and one of them thought her case so remarkable that he wrote it up for the medical journals and it was copied all over the world, and then, when she finally and inevitably ended in the hospital, the doctors and nurses united in saying that she was the bravest woman they ever did see. And, of course, since then, she is not able to bear the least excitement or exertion," freely translating into her own words as she went along. "I know, I know, same old thing. About all she can do is to play bridge all day and all night."

Just as Anne was turning surprised eyes on Sally, preparatory to lifting an admonishing voice, Uncle Poodle drove up to the gate, severe, solemn, raven-like in black, Sunday garments, while beside him languished and pouted and dimpled and sparkled Wilmerdine, who had announced her audacious and unprecedented intention of going to church. Uncle Poodle, without even a glance at the starched, pink lawn prettiness at his side, handed her the lines im-

personally, while he rheumatically descended to assist Mrs. Nesbit into the place of state on the back seat of the conveyance, as apparently oblivious of Wilmerdine's coquetries as a rock in the ocean to the froth foaming about it.

Mrs. Nesbit in a fresh flutter of excitement prepared to meet a congregation of collective eyes, resolving itself finally into the one, severe, disapproving yet withal grudgingly admiring gaze of Mrs. Hill.

"You're sure, Mis' Salt," she pleaded tremulously, just as she stepped into the carriage, "you're sure that it all ain't too frivolous?"

Reassured, her wavering confidence restored by Sally's positive opinion and Streatham's fluently expressed compliments, she drove off, fortified, for a time at least, against even the cold scrutiny of the individual Hill eye.

For a season after her departure, there was silence on the porch, broken only by the low murmur of the voices of Lucy Parrish and Witherspoon from their vine-shaded retreat, until Harris Hurd sat upright, pushed aside his "Sunday supplements" and three or four sprawling cats, and jumping to

his feet with a shout of joy, ran down the path to meet Hilda, who had just opened the gate; and Sally, looking up to see the girl advancing through the sunlight and the flowers, was aware of a curious sense of waiting; a submerged but struggling consciousness seemed to warn her that a moment of destiny was at hand; one of those strange, fateful seasons when having eyes we see, and in that brief flash of clearer vision we are permitted to look upon the web weaving; to see, but never, despite the passion of desire that may shake our hearts, to lay hands upon the loom.

And as Hilda stood before Sally with her little brother's arms about her waist, his dark head pressed against her shoulder, the sunlight shimmered a moment in Sally's eyes, and not Hilda, but Atropos, moved through the sun-mist, herself fate impelled and ready with those inevitable scissors to cut the golden thread of life and love.

"Good morning, Hilda," her own voice, its usual, every-day cheerfulness unmarred, rang oddly in her ear. "Anything particular this morning, or did you just want to see Harris?"

"Just to see Harris, Mrs. Salt." Her lids fell,

and Sally noticed the up-sweep of the dark brown lashes on her tea-rose cheek. "And—and mother wishes to know if you will send him home to-morrow, she needs him."

"Certainly." But at this undesired concession Harris turned from Hilda to throw himself on Sally's lap and beg for a longer stay.

Sally laughed, delighted with his display of affection and began playfully to argue with him, rewarding his cajoleries with promises of frequent repetitions of his visit; and still laughing, suddenly lifted humorous eyes from him to see that Hilda's glance hung upon Streatham, pale, insistent, imploring, her lips, too, moved slightly, almost imperceptibly, in some significant phrase meant for him alone.

For Sally, there was a moment of sudden, deep shock, as if every drop of blood in her body receded upon her heart. She caught her breath quickly and looked at Streatham; but in the act of lighting a cigarette, he returned the surprised, demanding, suspicious question of her gaze with an expression so inscrutable and unconscious, so absolutely and ad-

mirably innocent, that the emotion she suffered was increased by a violent flare of resentment.

So Sally, enmeshed in bewilderment, was merely thrown back on herself. "What was the meaning of this newly discovered matter; these evidences of a secret understanding existing between Anthony and Hilda Hurd? Why, she had supposed that he barely knew the girl. Were they, with their glances and their unintelligible, whispered phrases, all their mysteries, but gathering up the threads of previous summers? And how should Streatham dare insult her intelligence with his innocent assumptions? To fancy he could deceive her by turning a mask-face of mildly inquiring eyes and unreadable mouth to her suspicions? And Hilda! she looked at the girl, stooping now above her brother, cheek pressed against his, whispering endearments in his ear.

And Hilda lifted her head and met the full impact of that glance. It struck her like a blow. Her color wavered and faded, her eyes fell, the corners of her mouth dropped in a pitiful quiver, "I must go," her confusion overwhelming her, "I must go."

"Hilda Hurd might be almost pretty, if she were

not so—so delicate in appearance,” announced Anne, looking up from her book and watching the girl, who, with drooping head, had turned into the roadway.

“Pretty!” Streatham ceased to blow wreaths of smoke into the heart of a great, blue clematis flower and lazily turned his head. “Did you say—pretty?”

“Why? Do you not think so?” Anne was alert in a minute, ready to discuss the question in detail.

He did not answer, perhaps from sheer perversity and because he knew that nothing would annoy her so much, or perhaps because he did not hear her. His head was lifted, his eyes, unseeing, were fastened on the blue hills; but again he seemed to listen, to concentrate every faculty in listening as if once more there had fallen across his spirit that far call from the sunset, the crystal-clear, soaring, unearthly sweet sound of Hilda’s singing.

## CHAPTER X

### HIRED MAN OR HUSBAND?

THE afternoon was hot and humid. The sun shone through a watery mist and a hot, impalpable steam seemed to rise from the baked earth. Streatham was standing at the gate, looking up and down the highway, when Sally rode up. "Come on," she cried at the sight of him, "saddle one of the horses. I've got to ride over to West's for some more hands. Hurry."

Sally both rode and drove good horses. She was mounted now on a slender thoroughbred, with restless eyes and nervous ears, and it fretted and pranced about like a ballet dancer. She wore a short riding-skirt, a blouse open at the throat, and, as usual, she was hatless. Her red hair curled in tendrils about the nape of her neck, a neck like a smooth, brown column, polished as marble, with tiny beads of sweat where the hair began to grow and in the faint hollow at the base of the throat.



"Aren't you rather reckless, starting out now, Sally?" asked Streatham, as he cantered around from the stable, after saddling a horse. "Look at the thunder-caps on the horizon." He pointed to white, rolling tips of cloud on the sullen gray bank low on the sky and black in the sunlight.

"I know," said Sally, squinting her eye at the piled-up masses of storm, "I know, but I think we can make it. I've just got to have some more men, and I don't believe it's going to storm before we can get back."

"Optimistic Sally! You may be right. I'm willing to sacrifice conviction to courtesy and admit that you probably are, but, nevertheless, I'm also willing to wager that we get a very thorough drenching."

"I don't believe it," contended Sally obstinately, "and anyway, we're on two pretty fast horses, but—yielding to your opinion, Anthony, we'll make a sprint for it."

The turnpike stretched its burning length, white and interminable before them; the golden billows of wheat alternated with far-stretching rows of young, half-grown corn, a sharp, metallic green luster on their broad blades; these, in turn, were broken by

patches of woodland which afforded a grateful if momentary shade; but so rapidly did Sally and Streatham ride that the landscape appeared a swiftly shifting panorama of blended greens and yellows under a sullen sky.

Finally, with a sigh of relief, they turned their horses' heads down a shaded lane which led them eventually into the river road, a rough wagon trail, winding through the trees. The clouds were rolling up ever more rapidly and the sunshine was now quite obscured. The woods were dim in the strange leaf-dusk, green and solemn, and the ceaseless whisperings of the forest had fallen to an uncanny quiet.

In spite of these presages of storm, Sally and Streatham had to let the tired horses walk and cool off a bit, for the road was rocky and uncertain, winding unevenly through a thick growth of small-leaved elms, genial, graceful maples, and cottonwoods with their huge, spotted, smooth trunks; and the path was further impeded by rank, lush weeds, growing as high as the saddle girths and starred with tiny, jewel-like flowers. The air became every moment more still in the mystical, almost sentient silencing and deadening of every sound to the storm-

hush, as if the earth were consciously obeying some high command to listen and wait; only the river was exempt, for its rippling, eternal monotone, its lulling, unruffled, silver singing grew louder and louder, ever increasing in volume. At last, to Streatham's relief—Sally, if she felt any, made no sign—they reached their destination.

Hidden deep in the woods was a board shack roughly put together and containing two or three rooms, with a small, illy-contrived window or so, and a little to the rear, an outside pantry, containing cooking utensils and provisions; but no one was in sight, and although a thin spiral of smoke curled from the rude chimney of the cabin, there was no further sign of occupancy.

Sally rode up to one of the windows and peered in and then shook her head. "No one here," she murmured. For a moment her mouth drooped perplexedly, and then she put her fingers to her mouth and blew a long whistle. It was answered immediately from the rocks below, and presently a man, a rough enough looking fellow, stumbled up the cliffs and announced that he and his companions were fishing on the rocks below. He evidently acted as

spokesman for the rest, for after a few moments' conversation, Sally engaged four of them, striking an apparently satisfactory bargain, but concluding negotiations too late to avoid the storm, which was already breaking.

She refused to listen to either the men or Streatham, who urged her to wait, but insisted with her usual confidence and impetuosity that they would do better to reach the open than in remaining in the woods. Scarcely had they turned their horses' heads, however, before they were, as she expressed it, in the thick of it. For a few moments there was the constant jagged flare of lightning and the heavy, accompanying boom of thunder and her horse became almost unmanageable, leaping and rearing in a nervous panic.

"Hurry, hurry!" cried Streatham, trying to raise his voice so that he could be heard, "we must get out of these woods and into the open. Use the whip, Sally."

She nodded. Her eyes were brilliant with excitement, the color was deep in her cheeks. They raced on, the poor beasts stumbling, plunging, almost mad with fright, until, at last, they gained the clearing

again and turned into a broad, unfenced meadow. Here the horses stood trembling, taking the long slant of the rain. The thunder still rolled and rumbled about them, but the lightning was not so continuous, and Sally lifted her face to the heavy patter of the shower and laughed aloud at the sullen gray sky.

"Oh, I love it!" she cried. "God gets tired of these simpering days of sunshine and He gives us storms; rain to wash the dust off the world, and wind to lift up our souls and blow the cobwebs out of our brains. Oh, I love it! I love to live!"

There was the deep glint of a smile in Streatham's eyes as he looked at her. Her restless, tormented horse was standing quietly enough now, like a brown statue, with head sunk almost to knees, and Sally sat laughing, the wet coils of her hair flattened to her head, her water-soaked garments clinging about her, showing every strong, symmetrical curve and muscle, the rain following the oval of her cheek and running in tiny rivulets down her neck.

"You've never really lived, S—Sally, because you've never really loved. You d—don't know anything about it," Streatham answered.

The wonder was now that the color in Sally's cheeks did not dry the raindrops on them.

"I!" with a fine, scornful carelessness, "I've never really lived! Why, I live every day to the tips of my fingers, and I love everything that lives."

"Even me, Sally," whispered Streatham, "even me?"

Her lips curled, her full mouth expressing such generous scorn, so delightfully exaggerated, that Anthony laughed aloud.

"You! I wish you could see yourself, with all that straw-colored thatch plastered into your eyes. You're a fine sight! Come, the rain is over, we can go home. Come!" She leaned over and patted her horse's neck, and they turned out into the road, hard and beaten now, all its pillars of cloud laid, and unsuspected, rocky little gullies revealed. The flat surface of the sky was broken and opaline with color, and the gray, which a few moments before had appeared so solid and even, was only a tattered and trailing curtain, inadequately concealing the colors of the sunset courts. The wet leaves twinkled with raindrops, and the corn blades gleamed a brighter and harder green than ever.

"Sally," asked Streatham, without any particular relevance—they rode slowly now—"do you know that man is a dreamer of dreams, that he clings passionately to his illusions; in other words, he blows soap-bubbles from the cradle to the grave, and then, childlike, tries to clutch them; and when one breaks, when they all break, he keeps on blowing in the hope, nay, in the belief that some day he will achieve one glorious, iridescent bubble, finger-proof, rain-proof, fragile as mist, indestructible as asbestos; and he promises himself that he will tie a string to it carefully, fastening the other end about his heart, and preserve it for ever, an unfailing joy. Now, one of the greatest of his illusions is woman, his ideal of her, that fugitive but ever present illusion, the lady of the dreams of men."

"Woman has some illusions, too," remarked Sally dryly.

"Assuredly she has," he readily agreed. "One of them is that she thinks she has been badly treated for centuries. It is the pathetic pose of the cat with her paw on the mouse, who tells her friends that they can not conceive the sufferings she has endured from that wretched, squeaking animal."



Sally laughed in spite of herself. "Anthony, you just love to philosophize about women. That shows how much your mind runs on them."

"Of course," Streatham admitted coolly. "Woman is the most interesting creature in the world. She affects your imagination and haunts your peaceful hours. One moment she is a clinging darling who looks to you for strength, sanity and judgment. She trespasses on your time and takes possession of your dreams. But you—that's me, Sally—have a man's work to do in the world, so you sternly banish her and retire to the realms of pure reason. But does she leave you alone? Never. She obtrudes herself there and poses as a psychological puzzle, a being in the throes of evolution, who fascinates you with the problem of the free woman."

"Free! Freedom!" Sally drew a long breath. "That's the best thing in life, Anthony. We didn't mention it when we were speaking of life the other night."

"Oh, life! The jade!" He brought his crop down smartly on his leg, a shadow falling across his eyes. "How she mocks you!"

"Oh, don't begin that!" There was a sharp note

of impatience in Sally's voice. "Look! We are at home. I'll race you to the stable."

Streatham won by a neck in the brief dash before them, and, after leaving the horses in the care of one of the men, they sauntered through the garden on their way to the house. But although they had both been soaked to the skin, and even to the casual observer were in sad need of a change of clothing, they came but slowly up the wet paths.

The last long arrows of sunset were splintering against the trees; every blade of grass offered diamonds to any wandering, jewel-loving fairy. The flowers sprang more radiantly from the invigorated earth, with the clean, rejoicing freshness they always wear after a rain, and the mingled fragrances of Sally's garden permeated the damp air with more individual and penetrating odors. The birds twittered and fluttered on the boughs, and now and again the drops from the trees were shaken heavily on Streatham's head; but this sun-splashed interlude of rejoicing was brief; the somber rain-curtain, repaired, renovated and whole, was again veiling the splendors of the sun-courts, and the gray lady of twilight was slipping over the fields and through the

trees toward them, bringing in both hands moods of delicate contemplation, of communion and revelation, that the heart would never trust the lips to voice in the less intimate glow of noonday.

Streatham's hand had involuntarily sought Sally's and their steps moved in slow unison.

"Anthony," she shifted her eyes squarely to his, "do you care to tell me why Hilda Hurd came here to see you, night before last?"

Streatham looked steadily at the last bars of gold in the sky, frowning a bit meanwhile. Then he shook his head with a whimsical twist of his mouth. "No," he said, "I don't believe I do." He tightened his fingers around Sally's as he spoke, frustrating their evident withdrawal.

"And I suppose you don't care to tell me," she went on, "why, at three o'clock the same night, you went down to the stable, saddled my mare, Berta, without so much as a 'by your leave' to me, led her down through the meadow as stealthily as if you were a smuggler, and never showed up again until six o'clock in the morning, when you brought her in blown and in a lather of sweat?"

"Dear me, Sherlock! How *did* you discover all

this?" Streatham spoke in an affected surprise which but half-concealed his real amazement. "No," looking up at her like a naughty school-boy, "I'm afraid I shall have to keep the guilty secret. Did I ever happen to tell you, Sally, how my uncle Peterson happened to leave my father a thousand dollars in his will? No? 'Oh, you must know that! Funny thing!'" He mimicked her so audaciously to her face that, unwillingly, she paid him the tribute of involuntary if slightly discomfited laughter.

"My father," Streatham continued, "when he was a young man, went to visit my uncle Peterson. The first evening of his arrival a number of my uncle's cronies happened in, according to their custom, and sat about the great wood fire, smoking their pipes and sipping their hot toddy, and as argument and discussion waxed warm each man emphasized his statements by seizing the poker and vigorously poking and prodding the fire. My father sat, during the evening, an almost silent listener, vastly delighted with the charm of their conversation and the range of their information, but, with the modesty proper in so young a man, taking small part in the discus-

sion. At last they all departed, and my uncle Peterson signified his intention of going to bed, making various preparations for the night, such as winding the clock, putting out the cat and banking the embers.

“‘Good night, sir,’ said my father, taking note of these signs. ‘I have greatly enjoyed this evening, and trust that I shall greatly profit by it.’

“‘You will, sir,’ said my uncle, with a meaning my father did not then understand. Then he seized the young man’s hand and shook it, adding impulsively: ‘I thank thee, friend, that thou hast not once offered to poke my fire.’ And, mark this well, Sally, when he died, several years later, he left my father a thousand dollars.”

Sally tossed her head, her brow haughty, her color warm. “I don’t want to poke your fire. I’ve enough fire of my own to poke to supply me with an interest in life. Really, Anthony, I can mind my own business, if it’s strictly necessary.”

“Sally, darling! loveliest, most wonderful, adorable Sally!” The gray curtain had completely fallen now, and his arms were about her. “Kiss me,

Sally. Oh, Sally!" as she resolutely averted her head, "h-how can you be so unkind?"

And then Sally of the melting heart made one of her impulsive turns and cast her arms about his neck and locked her fingers together, and, holding him in that circle of love, answered him from her soul—the eternal feminine in her striving to bind and to hold.

"Then you will never go away any more? You won't be starting as soon as the corn cutting is over? Oh, for two years, how I have hated to see you go! Now you'll stay."

"Stay!" He drew back a little and looked at her strangely. "I can't stay; I've got to go on."

It was her turn now to draw back from him. "Why?" she asked, and he smiled at the familiar, imperative, incisive note of her voice.

"I couldn't live off you," he said brusksly. "Sit here by your fire all winter and read the *New York Tribune* and the *Farmers' Almanac*, and go out occasionally into the cow yard and peer up at the sky to see what kind of a day to-morrow would be?"

Sally tossed her head contemptuously at this cari-

cature of what his days with her would be. "Why?" she persisted.

He kissed a red curl on her temple. "Because I want to keep the dream; to come back to you. 'It's under the world, and over the world, and back again to you.' "

"I wonder," there was curiosity in her tone, "why you don't ask me to go with you?"

He laughed. "To my life, the life of a tramp and a vagrant? That's all I am, Sally, just a tramp. Sometimes I get dead broke, and then I write something, enough to start me off on my travels. It's here to-day and there to-morrow. It's color and change, and a certain amount of hardship. Sometimes a bit of excitement and danger, enough to spice things. It's swinging around the circle of the year and living on the thought of the harvest."

"And you think I'd stand that?" Her eyes blazed. "You think I'd sit here through the long winters and flatten my nose all day long against the window-panes, and run every time I heard a step outside, and stand sighing at the door, and look up and down the road to see if you're coming?"



"I've told you that I want to come back to you."

"And so you can." Sally was still aflame. "So you can. You can come back just as often as you please—as my—"

"—husband," he whispered, and kissed her again.

"—as my hired man."

He laughed at her quickness and audacity, but there was vexation in his mirth. "Woman! Woman! You want to keep your own freedom and clip my wings. If I remain here, I should be, in fact, your hired man, nothing more, while you would live your life as you please."

"I wouldn't," said Sally. "You've no right to assume such a thing. You've no call to say it. You'd be free to come and go as you pleased. I've lived too much to meddle with other people."

"Then what?"

"Why," turning on him with sudden passion, deep sparkles of fire in her reckless eyes, "you would never have thought and planned for your freedom and me too, if you really loved me."

"H-how do you know, Sally?"

Her defiant eyes softened suddenly. "Because,"

her hands pressed to her heart and a thrilling cadence in her voice, "because I love you."

"Ah-h-h!" He caught her again.

But she pushed his arms away with an impatient gesture. "I don't permit my hired man to touch me." She was half the length of the path ahead of him.

"Oh, you red-haired vixen! You flaming sunset!" as he caught up with her.

"But you will marry me, nevertheless," the whimsical, devil-may-care gleam in his eyes. "You would never let possibilities of—of future travel come between us." He paused before the word "travel," and then chose it as if it gave him a sardonic amusement.

She looked at him, and even in the dusk he saw a shadow like a veil across her eyes. "There's more than that between us, Anthony," she said, and the color, life and buoyancy had for once gone from her voice, "more than that."

## CHAPTER XI

### MRS. HILL FREES HER MIND

MRS. HILL closed Sally Salt's gate carefully behind her and puffed slowly up the path. Her figure resembled nothing so much as a tightly stuffed pillow, but her shadow, which preceded her owing to the position of the early afternoon sun, was elongated to a pleasing attenuation, and Mrs. Hill, choosing to regard it as a correctly outlined silhouette, viewed it with a complacent pride.

She wore her usual costume, a black print gown with white spots, a small black cape ever slipping from her ample shoulders, an invariable black bonnet, which changed from straw to felt as winter followed summer, but which, despite alterations of material, ever preserved an uncompromising structural identity, and through the medium of dejected and wilted trimming proclaimed the humility its wearer professed.

Mrs. Nesbit, leaning forward to peer, after her fashion, through the vines of the porch, watched the stately approach of her friend with an expression of timid pleasure mingled with apprehension—pleasure that the monotony of her rocking-chair meditations was about to be interrupted, and apprehension of the rebuke which she felt instinctively was in store for her, for Mrs. Hill had so far vouchsafed no comment on the new lilac silk gown or on the heliotrope bonnet, a delay which, as Mrs. Nesbit was well aware, presaged evil, perhaps a season of biblical invective, for Mrs. Hill was famed as a student of the Scriptures, could supply even the preacher with a quotation, giving chapter and verse at a moment's notice, and was especially conversant with those prophets of a nerve-shivering and blasting eloquence.

But her treasures of vituperation had remained stored for a day or two now, and Mrs. Nesbit's inward quakings were painfully increased by this ominous silence. The two had met, as usual, after church the preceding Sunday, and Mrs. Hill had so far condescended as to permit herself to be driven home in Sally's carriage, but after one swift, cold

glance at her friend's "purple and pride" she had steadfastly fixed her eyes on some point far beyond the fluttering little lady beside her, and had discoursed weightily on topics suitable to the day—the sermon, its inadequacies, obscurities and decline from sound doctrine; next, a numbering of the congregation and a lively discussion of possible motives prompting the absence of this one and the presence of that; and third, a comprehensive analysis of the delinquencies of every attendant.

Thus, absorbing herself in these time-honored and conventional themes, she entirely ignored Mrs. Nesbit's frequent attempts to draw attention to her finery and her mouse-like and tremulous nibbles at the subject uppermost in her thoughts.

This suspense had caused Mrs. Nesbit one or two sleepless nights, for she fully recognized in the light of past experience that the subject was merely deferred and must sooner or later come up between them.

Now, as Mrs. Hill slowly and ponderously swung herself up the steps, her face glowing red with her exertions, the little woman behind the vines began to twitter salutations and questions and irrelevant

remarks, with some idea of placating the offended gods of friendship; but the futility of this procedure was demonstrated by Mrs. Hill's unmoved demeanor, for she made no response whatever unless certain sounds between a grunt and a groan might be so construed. Sinking heavily into a rocking-chair, she untied her bonnet strings, flung them over her shoulders, and, accepting a hastily proffered palm-leaf fan with another groaning sigh, waved it solemnly to and fro.

"I came around by Ellen Potter's this morning," she announced. "She's terrible upset, and no wonder. Her best umberel is gone."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Mrs. Nesbit eagerly. "Her umberel! Pity sakes! Of course, you mean the one with the silver handle that her sister sent her from the city?"

Mrs. Hill nodded twice, three times. "She says it was solid silver," her tones shaded darkly with doubt and suspicion, "but before even her nearest and dearest got a squint at it she covered it over with black silk, made a little sheath just to fit it, so's it wouldn't tarnish, she says. Well, maybe," again the shading. "Still," with a large firmness, "I al-

ways found Mrs. Potter truthful, I must say that. But folks is up to all kinds of tricks these days," shaking her head ruefully over a degenerate world. "You see, the missionary society met there yesterday afternoon, and Mrs. Potter says that when she was cleaning up and getting ready for them she put that umberel with her own hands, in the southeast corner of the parlor, where it always stands, and she never thought of missing it until this morning. When I left there, about an hour ago, she was tying on her bonnet to make a house-to-house canvass to see if any one of the ladies might have carried it off by mistake." For the first time she bent her gaze upon Mrs. Nesbit. "I told her I saw you going off home with an umberel tucked under your arm."

"Course I did," cried the little woman, straightening up in her chair and acquiring a spine, temporarily, at least. "Course I did," two scarlet spots glowing in her cheeks, "and 'twas my very own that Sally gave me last Christmas. It has an ivory handle, handsomer than any Mrs. Potter's got the money to buy, and I don't think, Hetty Hill," sniffing audibly, her eyes filling with ready tears, "that you had any call to go and throw suspicion on me to



Ellen Potter. It don't seem the part of true friendship to me."

"I did my duty as I saw it," returned Mrs. Hill callously; "duty's no respecter of persons. If conscience is clear, there's nothing to fear. That's a good thing to remember, and easy, too, by reason of rhyming. Where is Mrs. Salt to-day?"

"How should I know?" Mrs. Nesbit's tones still showed a trace of injury. "In the fields, I suppose."

"Hmmm! With that Streatham, I suppose."

"I suppose so," replied Mrs. Nesbit vaguely. "Why, ain't that them now?"

Mrs. Hill leaned forward, her hands on her knees and gazed down the narrowing perspective of shaded path into the sun-flooded, flower-grown spaces of the garden. "No, it's John Witherspoon and Lucy Parrish."

"So it is," with reviving animation. "Looks kind of pretty, don't it? A-throwing flowers at each other, and him a-chasing her around the paths."

Mrs. Hill gave a backward and dissenting jerk of the head. "Maybe it looks pretty to you, Melinda, and others like you, but I tell you it looks mighty

different to any one whose thoughts is taken with the serious side of life." She gazed again down the sun-dappled path where Lucy stood laughing into Witherspoon's eyes, and slowly shook her head back and forth. "'Weep and howl, ye rich men,'" she repeated unctuously. "Yes, and there's another mighty true saying, 'You can't touch pitch and not be defiled.' That was brought home to me Sunday, Melinda," turning about and facing the shrinking figure in the chair with a cold and steady regard. "Living among those that makes perishing vanities like clothes their idols with feet of clay, is going to tell on any one, church member or not, sooner or later. That was certainly showed me Sunday; it certainly was," repeating the words with a slow and solemn emphasis.

Mrs. Nesbit fluttered her wings desperately in the effort to escape, but, as inevitably as the silly moth, she flew straight into the flame. It seemed to her that, entirely without her own volition, she heard herself asking the question she would have gone far to avoid. "H-how?"

Mrs. Hill busied herself for a moment in adjusting a bonnet pin. She was as unhasting, as unpity-

ing as fate. "We're a plain congregation of plain people," she said at last, sententiously, "and there was plenty among us Sunday that found lilac silk dresses and white bonnets all covered with heliotrope flowers so out of place as to be laughable. I saw more than one, Sunday, with their handkerchiefs and hymn-books up to their faces, and some of the younger ones couldn't help snickering outright."

This was the thumb-screws with a vengeance. It may be assumed that when the peacock, spreading arrogantly his gorgeous plumage, is censured for vanity he receives the rebuke either with indifferent scorn or mock humility; but when he learns that a jeering world, oblivious to the beauty of his feathers, is absorbed in the amused contemplation of his ungainly feet, his point of view changes with great rapidity.

So Mrs. Nesbit. Much as her timorous soul had quaked at the thought of the inevitable reckoning, she was nevertheless prepared for it, but to learn that instead of exciting awed comment she had served as food for laughter stirred her swift, emotional anger.

"I don't care!" she cried passionately. "I don't

care if they did! Mean old things! If they laughed it was just because they were envious. I know 'em all. And nobody, I don't care who, can say that my gown and my bunnit wasn't pretty."

Mrs. Hill was quite unmoved. "Pretty enough," she admitted grudgingly, "but was they in accordance with a church member, not to speak of a woman of your age? Fine feathers don't always make fine birds, especially if the birds has wrinkles and gray hairs, Melinda; then they just seem to show 'em up. Every time I stole a glance at you yesterday morning you were either looking at your gloves or straightening your sleeves, or putting a hand up to settle your bonnet; but how much did you hear of the sermon? That's what I'm asking you; how—much—did—you—hear—of—the—sermon?"

Mrs. Nesbit cowered at this inquisitorial question. "I—I—" she began, when there was a saving click of the gate, and Mrs. Hill's attention was riveted on Sally and Streatham, who entered together.

They were laughing as they came up the path, and Sally, as usual, was tossing her hatless red head in the sunshine. It was noontide, hot and high, the

benediction of the blue and cloudless sky upon a sun-warmed and basking earth.

"I don't like that Streatham," remarked Mrs. Hill, disfavor in her glance, as the two turned toward the garden and joined Witherspoon and Lucy. "Here he is currying favor with Sally Salt, all on account of her rich farms, and acting like his heart's set on her, and all the time he's carrying on with Hilda Hurd."

"Hilda Hurd!" echoed Mrs. Nesbit weakly.

Mrs. Hill nodded solemnly. Then, cautiously drawing her chair nearer Mrs. Nesbit: "It's only been a few nights back that he was seen walking down the road with his arm around Hilda and in the bright moonlight, too. And that's really the thing I came to see you about. It ain't right that Mrs. Salt should be left in ignorance of this matter, and you're the one to tell her."

"Me!" Mrs. Nesbit's voice ran the gamut of horror and incredulity. She fumbled for her handkerchief.

"Yes, you," affirmed her mentor strongly, now on her feet and tying her bonnet strings. "When duty calls, you got to answer, no matter what happens.

Right's right, and there's nothing for you to do, Mrs. Nesbit, but to tell Mrs. Salt what you've heard, being particular, of course, not to mention where you heard it. But it's your duty to tell her, no matter what happens to you, even if she should put you right out in the road. Right's right." She grasped her black cotton umbrella and slowly descended the steps sidewise, testing her weight carefully on one foot before she ventured to put forth the other.

"Well, good-by," she called back over her shoulder from the last step. "We've had a nice morning, ain't we? I guess I'll stop in at Ellen Potter's and see if she had any luck about her umberel."

But the huddled figure on the porch made no response. She was gazing at a fixed spot, hypnotized by the mental picture of herself sitting out in the roadside on her little trunk.

"Poor little Nesbit!" said Sally, lifting her head from the cup of one of her tall white lilies long enough to observe the departure of Mrs. Hill, striding sturdily, as one who had given his message without fear or favor, and the contrasting limpness of Mrs. Nesbit.

Sally was on her knees before a great clump of lilies, adoring them, rapturously inhaling their fragrance, caressing their shining leaves.

"S-she looks as if she needed a nurse," said Streatham, his eyes upon Mrs. Nesbit. "The r-really g-good missionary is usually a trained inquisitor. Soul-doctors and body-doctors may be roughly divided into two classes: the suave and the brutal. Mrs. Hill, now, I should put in the latter class. She s-scorns the methods of modern surgery, the kind anesthetic, and removes the mote from her brother's eye with a good old-fashioned pruning hook. Efficacious, no doubt, but a little rough on the victim."

"One of us really ought to go and administer first aid to the injured, I suppose," said Lucy Parrish, making, however, no effort to do so.

"That is what I wanted to do in the south field a bit ago," said Streatham in an aggrieved tone, "but I wasn't allowed to do so."

"Indeed, no," said Sally heartily. "John," appealing to Witherspoon, "what do you think happened? One of the reapers broke down, and I immediately saw, not only in Anthony's eyes, but in



the eyes of every man in that field, that gleam that always comes when they think that they are going to get a chance to tinker at a piece of machinery. The clumsier the man and the more intricate and delicate the machinery the more his fingers itch to get at it. It is always so. A man never sees the least thing out of order that he doesn't say, 'I can mend that for you in a jiffy; just hand it over to me,' and something that might be set right in no time by a skilled worker is thus hopelessly ruined. I knew the other men wouldn't dare touch that reaper while I sent for a machinist, but I couldn't trust Anthony, so I told him dinner was ready. Seeing that he was under the influence of one passion, I threw another into the field and watched them fight it out. Hunger conquered; but you should have seen the way his feet dragged."

"B-but," argued Streatham, "don't you see that we should be commended, not blamed, nor held up to ridicule? It's a left-over impulse from the age of chivalry. Then we wandered about redressing the wrongs of unhappy maidens. Now the unhappy maidens are fully capable of adjusting their own

wrongs, and nothing is left for us to adjust but machinery."

"Speaking of adjustment," Sally broke in, "I suppose I really should go and set poor little Nesbit straight. She looks as if her brains were scrambled eggs."

"No," Anthony protested, "come down to the barn instead, and see the new fox terrier puppies. Mrs. Nesbit is an india-rubber butterfly. She always looks crumbled to powder after Mrs. Hill has taken a turn at breaking her on the wheel, but you know that she's as good as new in an hour or so, and anxious to be broken all over again. The people who are born to be imposed on in this world are always aggrieved when they're not. Come and see the puppies, Sally."

Sally was not difficult to persuade, and she and Streatham strolled off together, Lucy and Wither-spoon preferring the cool seclusion of the garden.

As Sally and Anthony passed the kitchen windows the most delightful and appetizing odors were wafted to them, and Aunt Mandy thrust out her turbaned head.

"Don' you be fixin' to keep Miss Sally down dere too long, Mr. Anthony, playin' wid dem worthless lil' pup-houn's. I goin' to dish up dinner in 'bout a minute, and there's some tings you always got yo' mouf set for, Mr. Anthony. How 'bout roas' chicken, an' co'n puddin', an' sweet taters baked wid sugar, an' lima beans fresh from de gyarden? He, he, he!" Her sides shook with laughter as Anthony went through a pantomime of ecstasy at the mention of each separate dish. "Oh, Miss Sally!" lifting her voice as they sauntered on, "ef you sees dat Wilmerdine loiterin' round anywheres, you send her right home, double quick, please ma'am."

"If my eyes don't deceive me," remarked Sally, a moment later, "that is Wilmerdine now, pirouetting before Uncle Poodle and reinforced by all the puppies. Why can't she leave that poor old man alone?"

"But you must admit," urged Streatham, "that Uncle Poodle does not seem particularly affected by the pirouetting, although, to speak impartially, I can not believe that such superlative indifference is genuine."

"If it isn't the real thing, it's a mighty good imitation," said Sally dryly.

Streatham burst out laughing, the low, almost soundless laughter in which he expressed his mirth.

"Sally, look; he might be one of the three monkeys of Nikko, from his pose and appearance, seeing no evil, hearing no evil and speaking no evil."

In truth, Uncle Poodle might have been a grotesque image carved in ebony guarding the entrance to Sally's kitchen garden. He leaned upon one of the posts of the little paling gate, a small, bent figure, with short bowed legs and enormously long arms. His face, as always, wore an expression of almost incredible solemnity, and his brooding, melancholy eyes were lifted unwinkingly to the brilliant sky.

Before him Wilmerdine, a thistledown for lightness and grace, ran races and frolicked with four fat little fox terrier puppies. Her heavy, coarse, black hair had become loosened and hung low on her shoulders, and the lovely cream of her cheeks was stained a deep crimson. When she occasionally varied her pretty play by dropping upon the ground and letting the puppies overrun and tumble over her,

her crisp pink frock spread about her like the petals of a hibiscus flower.

At the sound of Sally's and Streatham's voices Uncle Poodle dropped his gaze until it rested upon them, or rather upon the tops of their heads, for never did he permit it to fall so low as Wilmerdine.

"'Scuse me, Miss Sally," he said, advancing with a profound bow, "'scuse me, Mr. Anthony, but I ain't satisfied wid de way de tomatoses is lookin', Miss Sally, an' ef it wouldn't disturb you none, could you pleas'n stop an' look at 'em, an' den we might be concoctin' some way to kin' o' brace 'em up an' have 'em seem perter?"

"All right, Uncle Poodle." Sally caught one of the puppies as it made a rush at her ankles, and held it up against her face. "The darling! Look, Tony, he's dragging my hair down with his little teeth. I'll be right out after dinner, Uncle Poodle, before I go to the fields, and we'll decide on the particular kind of a bracer the tomatoes need."

## CHAPTER XII

### MRS. HURD'S NEXT MOVE

**T**RUE to her word, as soon as Sally had finished her midday dinner she sauntered down through her kitchen garden to observe her drooping tomato vines. Now and then she stooped and plucked a sprig of thyme or summer savory and nibbled it as she walked; but the even rows of well-cared-for vegetables on either side of the path did not receive anything like the full share of her attention.

Sally was by nature an optimist. To worry required an effort on her part, and yet she had received a shock on the previous Sunday from which even her joyous and soaring nature had not fully recovered. The discovery of some secret understanding between Anthony and Hilda, the girl's mysterious visits, the peculiar embarrassment of her manner—these had caused Sally some sleepless hours of puz-

zled cogitation. But, imperious even with herself, she had resolutely put these things from her, and had refused to descend either to the level of petty suspicion or of a more degrading jealousy. And very widely she would have opened her eyes at the mention of the latter word in connection with her own emotions—very widely indeed.

She was singularly free from any taint of vanity, but had any one ventured to hint to her of the possibility of her being jealous of Hilda, she would have burst into a peal of rich and ringing laughter, entirely unfeigned and natural, her blue eyes twinkling with mirth and gleaming with just one deep spark of fire. Jealous of Hilda! The rose jealous of the thistledown? Wine of water? The sun of the moon?

Nevertheless, although she had not permitted herself to show the least difference in her manner toward Anthony, she was deeply hurt by his refusal to admit her to his confidence. Now, as her mind reverted to it, a little frown deepened between her brows. Why had he withheld it? Oh, nagging and insistent question! Why?

The slight crunch of gravel, an approaching foot-



step, recalled her to herself, and she lifted her eyes to see the tall figure of Mrs. Hurd, with the inevitable Trip at her heels, proceeding slowly up the walk from the lower end of the garden.

"What on earth can she want?" muttered Sally vexedly, and, instead of advancing hospitably to meet her visitor, stood perfectly still, her level and slightly questioning gaze requesting very plainly the reason for the intrusion. The bean vines, twining in luxuriant wreaths and festoons over their tall poles and waving flaunting little tendrils from the summits, made a fluttering and effective background for Sally's copper hair and blue cotton frock.

Mrs. Hurd's advance was not rapid. Her movements were always slow and heavy, and in the present instance she apparently saw no occasion for haste. Her face in the depths of her black slat sun-bonnet was as expressionless as ever, set in its usual granite calm, and yet, as she looked up to see Sally—a picture painted in the pure pigments of nature, in living and brilliant colors, Sally, vital as the earth, with her red gold hair and the unquenchable joy of her spirit, sparkling, leaping, laughing in her blue eyes—there was a sudden gleam of triumph in Maria

Hurd's inscrutable face, as if at last the opportunity had come to assuage her raw resentment, hidden, but ever rankling, that this impetuous, arrogant Sally Salt had discovered the secret passion of her soul, that passion whose roots had twisted and wound themselves through her nature, absorbing all generous impulses and nourishing only the one monstrous and poisonous blossom—love of money.

"Good day, Mrs. Salt," she said as she drew near, her voice more humbly suave than ever. "I just thought I'd step over for Harris, and save you the trouble of sending him home. I'm kindly obliged to you, Mrs. Salt, for the trouble you've taken about that child. I see now that it was all for the best that he came to you."

"Trouble!" laughed Sally carelessly. "He's a joy. I wish you would let me have him all the time."

Maria Hurd's eyelids drooped. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Salt, but I couldn't do that. I need him at home just now to help me. I need him particularly just now." The words were spoken with a peculiar emphasis, an underlying meaning which arrested Sally's wondering and indifferent attention, but for

the moment only. A little silence fell between the two, and then Mrs. Hurd drew a long breath and cast a quick, furtive glance at Sally.

"You see, a good deal that's been coming to me's likely to be cut off."

"How's that?" asked Sally idly. She was looking at Trip, and her mouth twitched involuntarily. How uncannily that mongrel cur suggested his mistress! He had the same heavy slowness of movement, the same unreadable eyes, and the same suave and yet commanding humility of bearing. A little shiver ran down her spine. They were two black blots on the sunlight. Shadows, both of them, and the human suggestion of shadow ever carries with it something sinister and chilling.

"Well, you see,"—Mrs. Hurd paused and looked cautiously about her,—“there is no one here to overhear us, is there, Mrs. Salt? This is particularly confidential.”

"Oh, there's no one around." Sally spoke in half-tolerant, half-impatient amusement at her companion's air of mystery. "They say that walls have ears, but I never heard that vegetables have."

Both tone and words brought a quick but almost

immediately suppressed flash to Mrs. Hurd's eyes, a tinge of color to her cheeks, but her tone, lower and more deprecating than ever, seemed to belie the menace of her words.

"I guess before I've finished, Mrs. Salt, you'll be as anxious as I am now that there sha'n't be any one listening around. You know Mr. Grissom that's been taking his meals with us right along?"

Sally nodded, and now she bent her gaze more intently upon her uninvited guest.

"Well," continued Mrs. Hurd, "it looks as if he'd got into some sort of trouble. Jake Washburne, he brought me this paper the other evening." She drew a tightly folded newspaper from her pocket. "Will you read this article, Mrs. Salt?" opening the paper and indicating certain heavy head-lines with her long, fleshy forefinger.

Sally uttered an exclamation of surprise at the pictured face of Grissom, and ran her eye quickly down the column.

"Good heavens! A confidence man! Just as I—well, you can't be accused of entertaining an angel unawares, can you, Mrs. Hurd?"

At her bantering tone Maria Hurd's nostrils con-

tracted slightly, and two white dints showed themselves in the corners of her mouth.

"Oh, I guess I ain't the only one." She spoke with a deadly and ominous meaning. "But," quickly recovering herself, "I guess there's no doubt but what it's Grissom. You see, Jake, he's been in correspondence with the heads of the police, and he thinks he's got Mr. Grissom sure."

"Has he been arrested?" asked Sally.

"No'm, not yet. You see, he went away a day or two before Jake got on to all this, and he won't be back till—well, a few days. Then Jake will get him the minute he strikes the place."

"Then Hilda—!" cried Sally, a sudden light breaking upon her.

"Hilda!" repeated the girl's mother contemptuously. "Hilda knows nothing of all this."

"Then what—!" Sally stopped short, withheld from further speech by some curious intuition which she could not have explained even to herself.

"Oh, you thought that since Jake is so struck on Hilda, he would naturally tell her first?" Mrs. Hurd answered Sally's broken interrogation with a question. "No, he's got too much sense for that,

even if he is in love with her. You can't count on Hilda. There's no dependence to be placed on her. It was her mother he came to see for once," with a sort of grim humor, "and he told me all about it Sunday evening, sitting on our porch in the moonlight while Hilda had mooned off somewhere, as usual; with her father, most likely. So I thought I'd come to see you to-day."

Her voice was now so pregnant with meaning that it would seem as if the most indifferent and absent-minded of listeners must perforce be struck by it; but to Sally it conveyed nothing. Indeed, she scarcely heard it. She was thinking rapidly, absorbedly, piecing the events of the last few days together in her mind, and so admirably did the pieces fit, that with her mental patchwork came a sense of buoyant relief. It was all perfectly clear now. Hilda had evidently overheard the conversation between her mother and Washburne, and in her anxiety to help Grissom had turned to Anthony for assistance. That accounted for her agitation, her peculiar conduct on Sunday night. Yes, that was it. Almost distraught by the danger which threatened Grissom, she had come to Anthony to unbur-

den her mind, and he, out of the kindness of his heart, had first calmed her fears and then had ridden off at midnight to send a message of warning to her lover.

Sally breathed a long sigh and looked up with ecstatic eyes at the sapphire sky. The whole hideous prison of her doubts fell in ruins about her, leaving her gloriously free. She looked abroad over wood and field, every shade of green melting through all gradations of tone and blending harmoniously to a full vitality of color in the amber light. Sally felt as if she were in a wide, fathomless ocean of sunlight, a tideless, peaceful sea which rose as high as her heart and flooded it with happiness.

She understood now why Anthony had refused her his confidence. It was Hilda's secret he was keeping, not his own.

"I thought I'd better come to see you to-day, all things considered." Mrs. Hurd's menacing, patient voice broke through her dreaming.

"That was kind," murmured Sally, and turned gay eyes upon her visitor. As she did so it suddenly seemed to her that the golden glory of the day



was dimmed ; again that little chill ran over her, and she shivered slightly. That black figure, imperturbable, waiting, with granite pale face and impenetrable eyes, was like some great raven, an image of doom and foreboding in the gold-green sparkle of the garden.

"What is it you want with me, Mrs. Hurd?" Sally spoke with an imperious change of tone. "I should now be in the fields."

Maria Hurd laughed, a single harsh croak. "I guess you'll be more interested in what I've got to say, Mrs. Salt, than in anything that's going on in the fields."

"I!" with a haughty, backward toss of her head. "What is the meaning of this? Come, Mrs. Hurd," her impatience beginning to be touched with bewilderment, "do tell me what it is you have to say."

The shadowiest of smiles flickered over Mrs. Hurd's face. "You didn't read that article in the paper careful. Neither did Jake Washburne." There was a touch of contempt in her tones. "Read it over again, this part, and read it careful." She came close to Sally and pointed out the paragraph which she wished her to read.

And Sally read:

"No photograph is obtainable of Grissom's accomplice, who seems to be an unknown quantity in police annals, but from the most accurate description of him which could be secured, he appears to have been a tall, loose-jointed fellow with blue-gray eyes, a tanned face and light hair."

The paper was crumpled fiercely in Sally's hand. Her whole body seemed for a moment to shrink and to gather itself together with tense force, as if to withstand a blow. Then, by an effort of will, the muscles relaxed, she lifted her eyes, gleaming blue as the sea in her pallid face, and steadily, defiantly met the hard, gloating triumph of the other woman's gaze.

"Well, what of it? Why do you show this to me?" Her cool surprise was almost natural.

"Kind o' funny, ain't it," Mrs. Hurd's tones expressed an innocent wonder, "that the description of Grissom's accomplice should fit Mr. Streatham like a glove? Kind of funny, too, that they should both be here at the same time. I remember," reminiscently, "the day that Mr. Streatham got here. Grissom came in to dinner in a great state. 'I've just

seen a stranger at Mrs. Salt's,' he said. 'I wonder if you know who he is?'

" 'Oh, that must be Mr. Streatham,' I said, setting his dinner before him; 'he comes every year for the harvesting.' "

" 'Streatham!' he says, and then laughs. 'Streatham!' he repeats, as if the name was kind of familiar. 'I thought I couldn't be mistaken.' "

" 'Do you know him?' I asks, struck by something in his tone.

" 'Know him!' he laughs again, 'know Tony! I guess I do. I know him of old.' That's what he said. Of course, Mrs. Salt, it may not mean anything, and again it may mean a good deal. I've been studying considerably about my duty in this matter."

"Shut up!" said Sally, her patience at breaking point, her voice ringing with anger and pain. "Why have you come to me with this? What is it you want now?"

Trip stirred, half rose, and then, in obedience to a slight motion of his mistress' hand, lay down again. "Money," said Mrs. Hurd softly, and with a sententiousness equal to Sally's own. "You see,

Mrs. Salt, you're so free-handed and generous," she faltered, actually quailing before the lightning of Sally's eyes, and then, with a faint, scornful smile at her temporary weakness, went on, "and you see, Jake Washburne didn't half read that article; his mind was so taken up with the idea of finding Gris-som and claiming that reward that he couldn't take in anything else. Of course, he may read it over again and take notice of the description of Mr. Streath—" she stopped under another blazing glance and carefully amended her speech, "of the description that seems to fit Mr. Streatham, but Jake is slow-witted, and he'd never think of fitting it to Mr. Streatham, who comes here year after year and is known to be a particular friend of yours. No, there isn't one chance in a thousand that Jake would ever think of it himself." Then slowly, that Sally might grasp the full import of every word: "Certainly I'd be the last to point it out to him, unless I suddenly felt it my duty. You see, Mrs. Salt, my conscience might get to troubling me at any time. Well," after a moment or two of waiting silence, which Sally did not break, "I must be going. You'll want a little time to think about this and to talk it over with Mr.

Streatham, so I'll stop in again later, and we'll see what arrangements can be made. Come on, Trip."

They moved away together down the path, the dog following his mistress with an exact reproduction of her peculiar clumsiness of motion.

"Sally! Sa-al-ly!" Lucy Parrish's voice floating through the garden aroused her, standing like a statue, her fingers clutching the paper, her eyes staring before her, motionless, almost breathless, in a trance of pain which subdued and benumbed all her alert senses. So she had stood for the last ten minutes, and so she might have continued to stand for an even longer period had not Lucy's high, clear voice, growing nearer every moment, roused her from this nightmare catalepsy.

Awake, alarmed, she started forward and, following her immediate and primitive instinct, looked about her for some place to hide. The garden, broad and open, afforded her no shelter, so, taking the path recently traversed by Mrs. Hurd and Trip, she ran down it and, following the first turning, disappeared into a dense growth of trees which separated the garden from the fields beyond.

Once safe in that cool, dusk green refuge, so kind

and shielding, her strength deserted her, her whole body trembled, a mist swam before her eyes, her knees gave way under her, she stumbled, almost regained her footing, and then fell heavily to the ground. It had required all the effort of which she was capable to maintain her self-control before Mrs. Hurd, and now, in the moment of complete reaction, mental and physical, she was bankrupt of the sustaining forces of will and energy.

For a time, as she lay there, her mind was a blank. She was conscious only of the fluttering of her pulses, the throbbing in her ears, and then agitating thoughts, like dark clouds succeeding dark clouds, began to press upon her and trouble her mind.

What unbelievable hints and innuendoes had Mrs. Hurd been pouring into her ears! Aspersions against Anthony? The baseless scandals of a cruel and scheming woman, who saw evil everywhere and in everything! Why should she have been so affected by lies? Lies! How foolish of her to have been so influenced by anything that woman could have said. No wonder that there seemed to be black clouds all about her, that they seemed to succeed one another in rolling masses before her eyes.

She would lift her head above them and breathe a purer air. Then she fell back again and moaned at the quick needle-thrust, the recurring, piercing stab of suspicion.

She lived over again that hour or two with Anthony on the moonlighted porch, the night fragrances blown to them on every breath of wind and the moonflowers unfolding their white cups all about them. She recalled the amusement, the abandon, the inimitable mimicry with which he had told the story of the swindle. How perfectly he had portrayed the sewing-machine agent! With what assured strokes he had painted the whole picture!

And she! What did she really know of him, of his manner of life? Nothing, thanks to his peculiar reserve and the mystery in which he enveloped his actions.

She pressed her hands to her head, the battle within rent and tore her, but the gallant little army of refutations and hopes and beliefs was gradually overcome, beaten back and put to flight by the increasing hordes of thronging and sinister doubts. This cloud of witnesses pressing about her was



augmented and reinforced until it extended to her furthestmost horizon.

Worn, spent, she acknowledged defeat. It was true! Oh, it was true! She buried her face in the cool, dark grass, and the tears she wept blinded her eyes with their torrent and scalded them with their bitterness.

## CHAPTER XIII

### TIGHTENING THE SCREWS

**E**ACH hour of the afternoon as it struck was a herald announcing some new revelation of beauty, the imperceptible but perpetual shifting of light ever giving new values to the picture of meadows and fields and distant hills, values which could only be estimated by the rhythmical markings of time.

Three o'clock—the sun still broadly high, mid-afternoon at the zenith of its golden opulence, earth in a motionless dream in an enchanted atmosphere of strained honey.

Four o'clock—thin amethyst hazes on the hills, violet black shadows tapering longer every minute and encroaching further on the sun's cloth of gold.

Five o'clock—a breeze from the river, the earth draws long, awakening breaths, the trees flutter their leaves against a sun-rayed background and

their shadows are as long and pointed as if elms and oaks and maples were all firs.

Six o'clock—the hills are outlined with a rim of gold, the sky has changed from sapphire to pale green and rose, the flowers lift up their drooping heads to drink in the indescribable and reviving freshness of the air, and give out all the richness of their perfume, not that faint, evanescent incense with which they welcomed the dawn, but the last essence of fragrance which the burning sun has drawn from their very hearts.

And all through the glorious pageant of the hours Sally had lain where she had thrown herself in the cloister of shadow of the encircling trees, her head pillowed on her arm. As it neared sundown the noisy birds had filled the branches and chattered and flown back and forth, but Sally had not even turned her prone head to look at them. Gradually the long arrows of the sun, which pierced the soft, green gloom, dazzled over her head and splintered themselves against the tree trunks no longer; the birds were quiet, barely giving a sleepy twitter now and then; the sun sank, draining the world of color, and the dusk was dim in Sally's refuge.

"Sally, Sally," it was not Lucy Parrish this time, but Streatham, calling her very softly. A quiver of pain and apprehension passed over her and then she crouched lower, hardly breathing, praying that he might not see her; but he drew nearer, continuing to call, and presently entered the circle of her concealing trees.

Humiliation surged over her, this proud Sally. She was about to be discovered in her defeated moment, crushed, beaten to earth. She could not bear it, she, who had always met the foe with head up, defiant. She was on her feet in a minute, but she had lain so long upon the ground that her limbs were numb and stiff and now she swayed slightly and caught at the low-hanging branch of a tree for momentary support.

"Sally!" Streatham held her close in his arms, his voice quick with ready sympathy. "Sally, what is it?"

She fell limply against him. Here was strength and comfort. Her whole sick heart and tired body ached and craved them. Then she repudiated them at the price. She turned her head aside and pushed him from her.

"Sally, ah, Sally, what is it?" His voice was full of the tenderest concern.

But she could only shake her head mutely, and his quick eye, roving about, saw the newspaper on the ground. He snatched it up, ran his eye over the columns, threw one glance at her averted face, gave a long, low whistle and then fell to reading the marked and head-lined article with undeniable intensity and concentration. It was difficult to decipher the words in the growing twilight, and he stepped to a little opening between the trees where the evening light fell more clearly. Sally, feeling still the necessity of support, had thrown an arm about a tree trunk and stood with her head pressed against the rough bark, her eyes gazing listlessly before her.

Streatham carefully read the whole article to its conclusion and then with a shrug of the shoulders looked at her with a strained yet whimsical twist to the mouth. "So this is what has taken the color out of you! Why," drawing nearer to her, "tears have washed you as white as a ghost. Why?" There was a genuine surprise in his voice.

There was a faint return of spirit in the way

Sally's chin was flung up. "Isn't that enough to make me pale?" she cried.

"This!" He laughed contemptuously, incredulously, and struck the paper sharply with his fingers. "This? Why?"

"Have you read it through?" She stood free from her support now, her eyes fixed steadily on his face.

"Naturally," he returned coolly, his glance unwavering, but that meant nothing to her. There remained with her the stabbing remembrance of other direct glances, frank and free, given in moments of almost ostensible concealment, but she did not notice that his smile, in spite of its whimsicality, held a touch of pain. "You must have observed that it has very fully occupied my attention for the last five minutes; but you seem to have discovered in it something I have overlooked. What is it?" He had dropped the carelessness of his tone; it rang now a sharp challenge.

"What do I make of it? Oh, Anthony, what's the use?" Her voice broke in a sob. "What should I make of it but one thing?"

"Yes, and that one thing?" Into his glance there

had suddenly flashed something acute and penetrating, something as high and haughty as Sally's own spirit, that met her on her own ground and gave no quarter.

"Oh, why do you make me explain what you know so well?" she cried impatiently, resentful of fresh suffering. "I know now why Hilda Hurd came after you the other evening, all of a tremble and frightened as a mouse which has just managed to escape the paw of a cat. She had overheard this whole affair of Grissom and the old farmer discussed by Jake Washburne and her mother, and intent on warning Grissom, she had turned to you as the one person who could help her. Naturally, you promised her your assistance and late that night rode off to send Grissom a message."

"Wise Sally, and quite correct, too. You are even more of a Sherlock than I thought." His voice was gently bantering. It seemed to her that his eyes were full of sardonic flickers. "But since all that is nicely explained, what is there in this article which has caused you to suffer as you evidently have been suffering?" As he said these last words the lightness faded from his tones, leaving only a deep



tenderness, a tenderness which was yet infused with something both stern and insistent.

"How can you ask me that; I almost said, how dare you?" she cried angrily. "Did you read the description of his—his accomplice?" The word broke explosively from her lips.

He glanced down at the paper again. "Light hair, blue-gray eyes, tall, um-m-m. Might do for a portrait, a newspaper pen portrait of me, might it not, Sally darling?" His whole face brimmed with laughter, his teasing, diabolic mirth with its suggestions of audacious mockery and reckless humor.

"If you laugh at me like that I'll—I'll—" she drew one quick breath and then hurled a torrent of words at him from a choking throat. "Do you think that I would pay any attention to that description, would even consider it for a moment? Never, if you had not told me that story the other night, the whole story that is written out there in full in that paper. And, oh, Anthony," it was an exceedingly bitter cry, "if you hadn't told it as if you had lived it all before! I felt it at the time. It made me restless and unhappy. I did not know why then, but I know now. And I've been lying here for

hours, trying to find excuses for you, trying to satisfy myself with some explanation that would really explain. I tried to think that truly you had read the story in a newspaper, and the drama of it appealed to you so that you, being a born actor, couldn't help acting it out; but you didn't tell it that way. That explanation and the way you told it wouldn't fit. And then I tried to think that Grissom had told you about it and that it had so tickled that odd sense of humor of yours that you couldn't help telling me, but I knew in my heart all the time that no man would tell another a funny story which might land him in the penitentiary. Oh, Anthony," every fiber of her pleaded with him, her whole being hung on the question, "how did you know that wretched story so well?"

In the growing twilight his face looked strangely troubled. All of its ironical amusement had vanished, his haggard face was drawn, his gaze melancholy, and, as he continued to hold her eyes, a faint, wistful smile crept about his lips. "Ah, Sally," there was a deep thrill of love and tenderness in his voice, he drew nearer as if he would clasp her in his arms. Then as she started back and turned

from him, "Sally," sharply, "you have just asked me what I meant, now I ask you the same question. Tell me, do you really, really believe this of me?" His tone was harshly incredulous.

"What else can I do?" she cried desperately.

"Then you do believe it?" The incredulity deepened to sheer wonder.

She twisted her hands together and looked about her with anguished eyes, but before she could answer him his eyes fell again on the newspaper and he asked quickly, "By the way, how did you get that paper?"

"Mrs. Hurd brought it to me." Her hesitating whisper was almost inaudible.

"Mrs. Hurd?" he repeated in puzzled incomprehension. "Mrs. Hurd! And why should she?"

Two or three minutes passed before Sally answered. If she told him that Mrs. Hurd also suspected him, he would probably see the advisability of acknowledging his guilt to her, Sally, and then arrange some way to keep the Hurd woman's mouth closed, and Sally did not want a confession gained in that way. She could insure Mrs. Hurd's silence without his intervention.

"Mrs. Hurd," she said at last, "oh, she—she seemed bothered about losing Mr. Grissom as a boarder."

He nodded. The explanation was quite adequate. At the sight of the paper he had a moment of wonder, but his curiosity, briefly acute, was easily satisfied. His mind returned at once to a far more important theme, Sally's attitude toward himself.

A silence fell between them, a silence which after a few minutes she felt unendurable.

"Oh, Anthony," she cried from her soul's depths, "if you would only explain, if you would only swear to me."

"And I will not." The words were as crisp as if clipped by a machine. All the perverseness, the unfathomable reserve, the peculiar reticence of Streatham came to the surface. "I will not."

Sally's head went flinging up like that of a restless, mettlesome horse. "Then the sooner you go the better."

Anthony merely shrugged his shoulders again at this, a shrug that was almost a wince, and the little smile that came and then went, was like a quick grimace of pain; but he said nothing, giving her time

for one of her sudden repentances. The sun had dropped sharply behind the hills, the long, gray shadows mingled and melted into twilight.

Anthony stepped across the grassy space which separated them and clasped Sally's hands in his. "You would not turn me out, would you, Sally?"

Her chin still up, her lips compressed, eyelashes on cheek, she nodded mutely.

Then she felt the hands that held hers tremble. "You're turning me out then, Sally, out of your heart and your home. Is it true, is it possible?"

"I begged you, Anthony, I beg you again to prove your innocence." The words came with difficulty, as if from a parched throat.

"I would never have called you a faithless generation, Sally, seeking a sign." Beneath his half-jesting words was a reproach so deep that it lost itself in wonder. "It isn't true," he whispered, after a moment's silence. "It isn't true." He affirmed it more strongly, lifting his drawn face to the pale opal of the sky. "Sally fail me! Sally fail any one! Never."

"I only ask such a little thing, Anthony." Her speech was hoarse and broken, she could barely

form the words. "I only beg you to prove to me—" she could go no further, her throat felt paralyzed.

Streatham did not answer and again silence fell between them. At last it was broken by him. "She's turned me off," he whispered stammeringly, "so there's nothing to do but go." He started a pace or two and then turning, caught her tightly in his arms. "Darling Sally, Sally of my heart!" He pressed his cheek against hers and kissed again and again the loose, waving hair about her brow.

"I know what I am, worse even than you think me, Sally, but you are not hard and cold and suspicious, and it's a lie if you seem so. You are warm and sweet and loving to the core, and it's a lie if you seem otherwise. Do you think that you are really driving me off, Sally? Never, I will never admit it. I'm going because I choose to go." He kissed her again, her eyelids, her mouth, her hair. "Then good-by. I'm leaving *you*, remember. Good-by. When you write and tell me that you, too, know that you never doubted me, never asked for a sign, then I'll come back to you; across the sea, across the world, back from hell to you, Sally."

He loosed his arms and abruptly left her. She

heard the crackle of little dry twigs under his feet, the sound growing fainter as he went steadily on, and Sally listened with strained and unbelieving ears. It wasn't true. It couldn't be. In a moment he would turn those dear, individual, gray shoulders and come back to her and tell her that it was all a phase of nightmare, the hideous delusion of a hideous dream.

So she waited; the brief, gray hour of twilight waned and night closed about her, black and hot and breathless. Then the wind began to blow, long gusts from the river, laden with all the lush rank smell of the weeds, the strange musk of the tasseled corn.

At last, some half-conscious impulse urged her to go home. The porch was deserted, the creak of Mrs. Nesbit's rocking-chair was silenced. She had gone to bed. The flutter of Lucy Parrish's white gown might be seen in the garden, but Anne, like Mrs. Nesbit, had retired. There was, however, a figure in black, calm, patient as fate, sitting on the steps, and curled at her feet something that resembled a motionless black mat, but which stirred and growled deeply in its throat as Sally drew near.



"Good evening, Mrs. Salt." Mrs. Hurd rose to her feet. "I have been waiting some time, but then," meekly, "I haven't minded that. It's been a rest to me."

"Has it?" said Sally dully. "Well, what do you want now?"

"The same little matter we were talking about at noon, Mrs. Salt. I'm sorry to hurry you, but things have got to be settled quick. If Jake has got to be told, it must be at once."

"I suppose so," returned Sally, more dully still, and dimly wondering why it was so hard to form sentences, and why her voice, like her feet, seemed to stumble. "How much do you want?"

"Five hund—" began Mrs. Hurd, and then seeing Sally's condition of absolute mental apathy, quickly changed and pressed her advantage. "A thousand," she said smoothly.

"Very well, I'll give you a check to-morrow." Sally passed on into the house.

## CHAPTER XIV

### BESIDE THE POPPY TENTS

MRS. NESBIT clutched Lucy Parrish's frock as that nimble-footed young woman ran across the porch. Lucy represented motion to her, she was always fleeing some one of Mrs. Nesbit's little group, Mrs. Hill or Mrs. Potter or Anne, Anne, who was willing to sit all day long on the porch and showed no disposition to philander, as Mrs. Nesbit expressed it.

"Lucy," quavered the little woman, holding her captive firmly by the skirt, "don't always be in such a hurry. A rolling stone gathers no moss, 'member."

"I do not want to gather moss," said Lucy with a grimace, "I want to gather roses while I may, for time is still a-flying. 'Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,' " she sang, and Witherspoon, hearing her clear, joyous voice, high and lilting as a bird's,

turned in his meditative pacing and awaited her, standing with folded arms in the flower-bright glory of the garden, but although Lucy's feet danced a restless measure, Mrs. Nesbit did not relax her clutch.

"Lucy," she continued in a loud whisper, "there's several things I got to talk to you about and I got to talk them out right now."

"But dear Mrs. Nesbit, I haven't a minute," coaxed Lucy, casting a glance of compunction at the patient figure of Witherspoon. Had he not paced every path of the garden a hundred times within the last half—three-quarters of an hour, while she had been trying this and that effect in hair dressing? Then there was the changing of a rose gown for a blue, and after viewing that in the mirror—viewing it! Rather, bringing the most comprehensive study to bear on it from every angle, only to discard it for a white frock. Next the question of the proper ornaments had occupied her undivided attention, and she had seen her couch strewn with a dozen hats before finally selecting one.

"Lucy, child," Mrs. Nesbit's voice was placating, the honeyed, intimate tones of one about to bespeak

the good offices of another, "now, Lucy, you see—my!" breaking off in artless admiration, "how pretty you do look, child!" Then becoming alarmed at her prisoner's growing impatience, "You see, Lucy, Hetty Hill, she's just been here and she's portioning out the donations for the festival that our church is having next week, and she thinks I ought to give more than any other lady, just because I live with Sally, and," lowering her voice and throwing a careful glance about her, "she scolded me something awful, oh, something awful, Lucy, because I hadn't told Sally how folks were talking because Anthony Streatham had been seen walking with his arm around Hilda Hurd the other night. And she frightened me so, Lucy, that what do you think I did?"

Lucy filled up a doleful pause by properly asking, "What?"

Mrs. Nesbit carefully unfolded a clean handkerchief and wiped her faded eyes. "I got all rattled, and I first told Sally about how folks were talking about Anthony and Hilda, and then I told her what Hetty Hill had said about my contribution to the festival. And Sally!" Mrs. Nesbit lifted her hands

and solemnly shook her head back and forth, "my land, Lucy! Sally just carried on high, said she wouldn't have Aunt Mandy baking up cakes for two or three days for a lot of scandal mongers to eat. That they could whistle for their donations and that the devil could fly away with Mrs. Hill, only he wouldn't because he didn't want any rivals and she was a bigger mischief-maker than himself. Oh, 'twas awful!

"Why, Lucy, Sally don't seem to see how that sets me in others' eyes. It's like making me an object of charity. Of course, folks know I consent to live with Sally on account of my son, and, as more than one has said to me, that Sally Salt can't begin to calkilate what my blameless life and standing in the church has done for her, acting any way she's a mind to and at any time she's a mind to. Of course," sniffing once or twice, "folks know 'way back in their minds that it's Aunt Mandy that bakes the cakes, and that it's Sally's flour and eggs and sugar that goes into them, but they never remember those things unless they're thrown in their faces.

"And the worst is, Lucy, that Hetty Hill is coming back here this afternoon to see what I'll give,

and unless something's done quick, I got to tell her that Sally won't allow me to donate anything; and then," in a rising wail, "folks will know for sure that I can't go into the kitchen and tell that high-handed, worthless Aunt Mandy to bake cakes for me, that she won't take her orders from me, and me a Hoskins." Again she shook out the careful folds of her handkerchief and applied it to her eyes. "And her a coon," she added as an afterthought.

Anne, who had been reading in a shaded corner at the far end of the porch, had sauntered nearer, the better to hear, and now, after thrusting one finger in the large, statistical-looking volume she carried to mark the place, she voiced her opinion before Lucy could get in a word.

"It does seem hard," she said with a sort of didactic sympathy, "and I think that you, Mrs. Nesbit, did quite right. Painful as she may find this horrid matter of Mr. Streatham and Hilda Hurd, it is better that Mrs. Salt should know it."

"Bosh!" Lucy commented explosively. "The idea of that old wretch of a Mrs. Hill trying to make a mountain out of a mole-hill, and you and Mrs. Nesbit aiding and abetting her. Mr. Streat-

ham never had his arm within a mile of Hilda Hurd, unless he picked her up when she fell down."

Anne lifted her brows with a faint, incredulous smile. "But is it a mole-hill, my dear Aunt Lucy?" She always argued firmly but pleasantly. "Are you not looking at the matter from a rather prejudiced as well as from a lax moral standpoint? Is it not, after all, a matter that Mrs. Salt should know, and, having been informed, most tactfully, I am sure, was it either kind or generous of her to take the attitude she has on this matter of the donation?"

"For heaven's sake, Anne," began Lucy, and then stopped, wisely remembering that Anne was not only capable of spending a whole day in the discussion of some perfectly trivial matter, but quite willing to do so, so avoiding danger, she turned to the small, woeful figure in the chair and gave her an admonishing, comforting pat on the shoulder. "Now, Mrs. Nesbit, you know as well as I do that everything will be all right. Stop worrying at once. You will have all the cakes you want, and you can promise just as many as you please to Mrs. Hill when she comes spying around again. Oh, I must go!" and stirred to fresh compunction by another glance



at Witherspoon's waiting and ever-patient figure, she flew down the steps around a turn in the path and into Sally's arms.

And Sally was pale under all her tan, and about all the upward curves of her laughing, reckless mouth were tiny lines, the etchings of pain, but her head was carried as proudly high and her blue eyes were as undaunted as ever.

"I was coming to rescue you, child. I saw that Mrs. Nesbit was deep in her tale of woe. It was the cakes, I suppose? Ridiculous!" in answer to Lucy's nod. "She knows that she can have all the cakes she wants and that she is going to have them. I wonder why poor little lost cats like Nesbit like to imagine themselves more wretched and maltreated than they are? There seems to be some law about it. They love to lap up a saucer of cream and then lie on the warm hearth and luxuriously picture the back fence in sleet and snow as an ever-present possibility."

"Oh, I do not mind her, it's Anne," said Lucy impatiently.

"Anne! Oh, Anne would stir up the angels themselves in no time. Poor Anne, she hasn't learned

that the kingdom of heaven is more a matter of disposition than morals. And some of us know it and can't act on it."

"The kingdom of heaven!" repeated Lucy dreamily, "I wonder if it isn't down there in the garden. Look, Sally, how the great, wide, happy sun shines on the little, lovely, happy flowers!"

"It's never lo, here, or lo, there, Lucy, though it sometimes seems so. It's always right here, in our hearts, love and peace and joy and forgiveness, and some of us can't forgive." It was the first time Lucy had ever heard even a tinge of bitterness in Sally's tone.

"How can you love a piece of furniture?" Lucy was still petulant. "Anne has about as much life and emotion as a—a—chair. That is it. She is just like a chair. She sits up perfectly straight and is nicely varnished and you can not forget that she is always there. And she has a chair's irritating way of always planting herself right in your path, so that you can not fail to stumble over it. Calling me 'aunt,' indeed!"

"Well, here is John Witherspoon. Tell him all about it," laughed Sally. "He won't call you 'aunt'

or 'sister' or anything irritating, I know; but dear me, I've no time to be pottering about here with you two when I should be in half a dozen different places."

She turned away, walking without apparent haste and yet covering the ground very quickly with her long, swinging stride. And Lucy and Witherspoon, following their idle mood, wandered farther into the mazes of the garden, down to the sun-warmed courts of color where the poppies were spreading their scarlet and white and pink tents of a day. Their petals, like silken banners proclaiming the presence of the dark nepenthe at their hearts; occasionally, loosened by the soft, midsummer wind, these fluttered in the air a moment and then fell to the ground, eternal symbols of the brilliant dreams which float on the tide of sleep.

"They last such a little while, such a little day," sighed Lucy. "Ah, why must everything beautiful be so brief—youth and love and romance?"

"You are wrong, Lucy," said Witherspoon slowly. "To have seen the glamour, to have felt the beauty, that is eternal, that is the real romance."

"It seems to me that some of the real romance has

gone," said Lucy slowly, "and Sally will not let me sympathize with her for a minute. I do not dare assume that there is anything out of the ordinary in Mr. Streatham rushing off like this, and I know that she will never tell me what has come between them."

Witherspoon did not seem especially affected by her emotion, a fact which caused Lucy a rather pouting surprise. "Sally didn't say good-by to him. She was not even in the house when he left, and yet, and yet I know that she feels it all dreadfully."

Witherspoon pondered for a time, gazing at her earnestly the while. "Lucy," he said finally, "do you not think a secret, a real secret between you and me, would add zest to the romance?"

Lucy clapped her hands delightedly. "It is just, just what we need. Whoever heard of a romance without the accompanying secret? Oh, do you really know one?"

"Indeed, I do, but I'm wondering whether I ought to let this tyrannical romance dictate to me. I'm wondering whether I have any right to tell you." He spoke so seriously that Lucy's curiosity was stirred to the depths.

"But," she argued quickly, "isn't it your first duty to be true to the romance? Do you think it is fair to evade any of its responsibilities or to break even the least of the rules of the game after you have solemnly undertaken them?"

"This is a more serious matter," he contended. "I doubt very much and yet—"

Lucy ceased to argue. "Please," she coaxed, her hand on his sleeve, "I've an ambition. I want to show you how beautifully I can keep a secret."

And Witherspoon, perhaps over-ready Witherspoon, capitulated. "Lucy, I fear that I'm a poor old dotard of a Don Quixote, but I can not resist my Dulcinea."

"Lucy Parrish and John Witherspoon must have something awful important to talk about," announced Mrs. Nesbit from her rocking-chair half an hour later. "They been walking up and down, up and down, with their heads together like they was planning a murder or an elopement."

## CHAPTER XV

### WHISPERS AND GLIMPSES

**I**T was Friday, the day upon which Grissom had said he would return. Since early morning, Mrs. Hurd had watched and waited for him, and now it was evening, and she sat, as usual after her day's work, in her chair on the porch. Trip was in his customary place at her feet, his head on his outstretched paws, his eyes brooding, watchful. Hilda, as was her wont, after sundown, watered her flowers, crooning one of her low little songs as she did so, and Mr. Hurd tramped up and down the road before the house, oblivious of its clouds of dust, his face uplifted to the sky.

For once Mrs. Hurd's face showed some expression. It was pale and slightly drawn and her eyes had a curious, eager stare as she continually watched the road. Where was Grissom? Oh, where was Grissom? And, since the last train had passed ten minutes ago and Grissom had not appeared, where

was Washburne? She tried to nurse the hope that the sheriff had intercepted his man farther up the road, but she had little belief in this possibility. For the first time in her remembrance she could not compose herself at will to her motionless and emotionless calm and await with patience the course of events.

Trip, too, seemed to feel the influence of her anxious spirit, for he began to stir about, now rising, turning himself in the smallest possible space and down at her feet again. A moment's apparent sleep, then he would lift his head suddenly, his nose twitching, and get up to choose another spot, not two feet away.

At last the woman so grimly waiting started forward and lifted her hand to shield her eyes. Was it? No. Yes, it was Washburne. It was difficult to be quite sure at once, because of the sunset dazzle behind him, but convinced that it was really he, Mrs. Hurd was quick in action.

"Hilda," she called, "Hilda," and as the girl came near, watering pot in hand, "I wish you would go over to Mrs. Hill's and get me a quart of new milk, and go the back way, Hilda."



"Yes, mother." Hilda, too, must have seen the approaching visitor, for she vanished about the house with an almost incredible rapidity, just before she disappeared, casting a frightened glance at Washburne, who was at that moment passing through the gate. But her exceeding alacrity to do her mother's bidding was unnecessary. He did not see her. His manner was preoccupied, his head bent; he brushed against Mr. Hurd at the gate and barely stopped to speak to him.

"Howdy, Mrs. Hurd?" he said surlily as he drew near the porch. She had risen as had Trip also, and both stood awaiting him with somber, asking eyes.

"Where is he, Jake?" Her tones were tense with anxiety.

"I don't know," gruffly, sitting down heavily on the step of the porch and drawing a cigar from his pocket. "I got one comfort, though," with a burst of coarse, unmirthful laughter. "I know that you don't know anything more about him than I do."

"That's God's truth, Jake."

"Oh, it ain't because you tell me so that I believe you, but because I've got the means of knowing," he replied with indifferent brutality. "Well," at-

tempting to view the matter philosophically, "I suppose it's a case of his waiting over a day or so for some reason or other. No use our getting discouraged yet. There's only one chance in a million of his having got wind of anything. He'll be along yet, you'll see."

"I suppose so," she agreed, "but it's kind of disappointing."

"Yes," he assented, lighting his cigar and then grinding the charred match viciously into the ground with his heel, "you bet it is."

There was silence for a few minutes, then he glanced about him.

"Where's Hilda?"

"I sent her over to Mrs. Hill's on an errand when I saw you coming. You'll wait, won't you?"

"Might as well. Nothing else to do," moodily. "Well," blowing out a great cloud of smoke and watching it float away in long spirals, "you been visiting Sally Salt considerable in the last day or two, haven't you? I didn't know that you and she were so thick."

She shot a quick, keen glance at him and slightly compressed her lips, but it took more than that to

shake her iron self-control. It was a second or two before she answered him, and then she spoke carelessly enough.

"Didn't you? Oh, me and Mrs. Salt have always been good friends. She's kind of keen on Harris, wants to adopt him and all that."

"Uh-huh," he responded uninterestedly; his curiosity, not his suspicions had been stirred, and the former emotion was easily allayed. "Well," his mind returning to the one theme which occupied it, "there's nothing to do but wait, I guess."

For a time they sat without further speech, he, leaning inertly against the unpainted pillar of the porch, smoking and watching with knitted brows the smoke wreaths waver and shift about him, and she, swinging back and forth in her rocking-chair and gazing steadily before her with her brooding, concentrated gaze.

At last, across the silence of the twilight there swelled the rising and falling cadences of Hilda's singing. Clear as the call of a lark, fresh and pure as a mountain spring, it poured out as unconsciously and naturally as a bird's song, and Washburne lifted his head to listen.

"Say, ain't that pretty," he said with the largest measure of animation that he could compass. "I never heard anything just like it."

Mrs. Hurd looked at him incredulously and then with a certain slow contempt, "I don't see anything very remarkable in it," she said. "There's folks goes raving over Hilda's singing. I guess they wouldn't if they had to hear as much of it as I do. Well," rising, "I'll be going in, now she's here to entertain you. Let me know the minute you hear anything, Jake."

"All right. Howdy, Hilda?"

The girl returned his greeting listlessly. Her singing had ceased and her step had lagged at the sight of him, but although his eyes had been upon her from the moment she had entered the garden gate, these signs of the esteem in which she held him conveyed nothing to his slow intelligence and dull sensibilities, occupied solely with the esteem in which he held her, and the desire of possession which her wind-flower grace aroused in him. Neither did he notice that she sat down as far away from him as the narrow limits of the porch permitted.

"It's a nice evening," she said. There was a sort of timid and resigned patience in both face and voice, as if she shrank from even a mental contact with him, but since it must be, she bore it with what grace of fortitude she could command.

"Sort of," he replied. "Say, Hilda," bending nearer and taking the cigar from his mouth, "I don't want to talk to you about weather and things like that. I guess you understand that by this time; if you don't you ought to," with a short laugh. "Of course, I know that you've got a kind of a shy disposition and all that, and I've always respected it, haven't I? But the time's come for you to know, if you don't already know, how much I think of you. Well, now don't you be getting frightened and trying to run away," he caught her hand as she half rose. "And it ain't any use trying to put me off any longer, either," in answer to her faint, confused protests. "You know how long I've been thinking of you. Now, I want you to marry me, Hilda, and marry me soon. What's the use of waiting any longer?"

He laid his hand over hers and Hilda winced and shrank visibly as she shook it off.

"I—I—couldn't, Jake." She had drawn almost shudderingly away from him, her face pale, her eyes dilating. "I couldn't."

"You mean that you want more time?"

"It isn't, it isn't just that," her voice was so low and trembling that he bent nearer to hear her, "it's that I can't marry you at all, Jake."

"Why not?" he asked harshly.

"Because I just don't—don't love you."

"I guess you mean you don't know your own mind." He strove to speak easily, but disappointment grated through his tones. "You're pretty young yet."

"No, no," she was all eagerness now, and leaned forward, anxious to make herself clear. "I do know my own mind, but—" she stopped abruptly.

"You only think you do," he replied. "I guess that's it. Why, Hilda, I don't want to brag, but what are you looking for? I know girls get fool notions into their heads, but I don't see for the life of me what you want." There was a masculine wonder in his tones. "I'm well to do, Hilda, well fixed in the world. You won't have to drudge and slave if you marry me. No, sir, I don't want that

kind of a wife. You can have your hired girl and your silk dresses and we'll take a trip now and then. Hmmm," looking up contemptuously at the small house. "You certainly ain't got much here, nor," with an equally scornful glance at Mr. Hurd, who was still pacing up and down the road, "you ain't got much to look forward to. Come on, Hilda," bending still nearer and coaxing her as one would a child. "You couldn't do better. I'm something of a catch. Why," throwing out his chest and speaking with robust conceit, "there ain't a girl in this county and several others who wouldn't pretty near jump out of her skin at the thought of getting me. And I'm mighty fond of you, Hilda. Don't you make any mistake about that, little girl. Here," his face close to hers, "lift up that pretty head of yours and give me a kiss and we'll call it a bargain."

But Hilda shrank still farther away from him and burying her face in her hands, fell to weeping. "I don't want to marry you," she cried. "Oh, why won't you understand? I don't want to marry any one." Her words were almost inaudible because of her sobs.

With a muttered exclamation, Washburne turned



from her and sat savagely chewing the end of his cigar and gazing before him in a state of somber irritation, but gradually his expression cleared. That any one could seriously reject him, such an one as Hilda, at any rate, was out of the question, beyond belief; and, as he continued to view the matter from this standpoint, his perplexity gradually gave way to tenderness.

"There, there, little girl, there's nothing to cry about, Lord knows. 'Cause you don't want to marry anybody, or you think you don't. That's the girl of it. Now, there ain't any hurry, Hilda, nobody is going to hurry you. And I want you to remember this, your ma's got no say in the matter, so you don't have to pay a mite of attention to anything she says. All you got to do, Hilda, is to know that I'm behind you. So it's a bargain. You ain't going to be worried or bothered about it, but when we get good and ready, you and I are going to get married, and, in the meantime," with a smile of conscious self-appreciation as the result of his diplomacy, "we'll kind of begin to make plans about the new house I'm going to build before long. None of your cheap little shanties," with another contemptu-

ous glance at Hilda's home, "but a fine, substantial house."

She lifted her tear-wet face desperately to his. "Oh, Jake, you must understand. I can not ever marry you," she cried.

The thick layers of his arrogant self-conceit were at last pierced by the wild sincerity of her tone. His whole manner changed in an instant.

"And why not?" he cried roughly. He thrust his chin into her face, his eyes blazing. "Is it because of that Grissom? Say," he caught her roughly by the shoulder, "are you in love with him? Because if you are—" he broke off threateningly.

"No, no, I'm not, I'm not!" she gasped, and thoroughly frightened, the delicately poised balance of her nature completely upset, fell to a more tempestuous and bitter weeping.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, "don't begin that." He stood up and, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, scowled anxiously down upon her. "Say, Hilda, Hilda, stop it," he begged. "It's all right. I didn't mean to frighten you. Say, don't cry that way." He leaned over and patted her down-bent head with his great hand, but at his touch she sprang

to her feet and shrank more visibly than ever from him.

"Why, why," her voice so shaken by her emotion as to be almost indistinguishable, "why does everybody think every girl wants to get married? I do not. Father understands, but he's the only one in all the world who does."

"What's the use of acting that way?" growled Washburne, but all of his rude efforts at consolation proving unsuccessful, he stood about rather helplessly for a few moments and then, deeming it the part of wisdom to postpone his wooing until a more convenient season, he shrugged his shoulders awkwardly once or twice, muttered some inaudible excuses and strode off into the darkness.

Hilda sat, a huddled shape in the gloom, still shaken by an occasional sob, her elbows on her knees, her chin cupped in her hands. At last her father wandered up the path, his hands behind him, his head uplifted.

"Father, father!" she caught quickly at his coat as he passed.

"Why, Hilda!" he exclaimed. "You not in bed yet?" He let his hand rest for a moment on her

hair, then sat down beside her on the stoop. "You like the night, too, don't you, Hilda?"

"I love it," she said dreamily. "It always makes me want to sing. I want to get away in some wide meadow and send my voice up to the brightest star I can see. I like to think it reaches it."

"Maybe it does," he said simply. "Things are nearer at night. In the daytime you can always see horizons, the end of things, but at night a star that you can see is a good deal nearer than the garden gate yonder that you can not see. And just think, Hilda, all around us are worlds and worlds that you can't see, but that are really just as near us as yonder star or as this morning-glory vine on the porch."

Hilda nestled her head against his shoulder with a contented sigh. "I don't always know what you mean, father, but I like to hear it. Do you ever get lonely in your world, father?"

"No," he shook his head, "not lonely, but a little—a little puzzled and impatient now and then. Did you ever hear anything that was so beautiful that it was like nothing else you ever dreamed of, Hilda, and while you held your breath to listen, it was gone? That's the way it is with me. I hear whis-

pers, whispers of wonderful things, and sometimes I see them, just a glimpse, and then they are gone. They are the real things, Hilda, and the only real things. But why do I see in part and hear in part? Why can I not see them wholly? That is what I can't understand."

"The real things!" she repeated. "Oh, I know what you mean. To me, they are the little songs that come to me when I am all alone."

"Yes," he said, "and you can hear whispers of the real worlds and you can see glimpses of them, but you can never really live in them until you know the secret. I've learned that, Hilda. There's some secret of life, that the world has lost or forgotten, but I've got to find it, Hilda, I've got to find it."

"Will it not come to us when we're ready for it," she asked, "just as my little songs come? Just as love comes? Sometimes for days I'll be thinking about one and it won't have any shape or music, and then, some day when I won't be thinking about it at all, I'll begin to sing it; words and music, it will all be there."

"Maybe it will," he agreed hopefully. "Maybe it will."

## CHAPTER XVI

### AUTUMN WITHOUT ANTHONY

“AUNT MANDY,” said Sally, as she stood in her kitchen one morning, “may I ask why you are throwing the pots and pans around at such a rate? Anybody might think a cyclone had struck us.”

There was another violent rattling of Sally’s pewter and copper vessels before Aunt Mandy saw fit to answer, then she shook her turbaned head ominously and shot out her lower jaw.

“I tell yo’ what it is, Miss Sally, I stood dish yer nonsense ob Wilmerdine’s just about as long as I gwine to. No, somepin’s got to be done, an’,” with portentous nods, “I jus’ about decided what it’s gwine to be.”

“Yes?” said Sally, who was stirring a great bowl of spice cake. “Well, on what line are you going to fight it out?”

“I ain’t quite ready to specify dat yet, even to

you," replied Aunt Mandy with importance, "but dere is one thing dat I knows mighty well, and dat is dis: I ain't one of dese yer ol'-fashioned mothahs dat's goin' to let a good fo' nothin' piece ob trash like Wilmerdine bring my gray hairs in sorrow to de grave. No, ma'am," with emphasis, "dese yer kids dey grow up an' dey think dey can teach dere po' ol' mothahs a few wrinkles, but dat ain't de way I am. I ain't dat resigned. Wilmerdine's goin' to have de surprise ob her life, Miss Sally, Wilmerdine's goin' to have dat overweanering pride of her'n humbled in de dust."

"Oh, come now, Aunt Mandy," expostulated Sally, "you mustn't be too hard on Wilmerdine. What do you propose to do?" She spoke with some anxiety.

But Aunt Mandy only tossed her head and indulged in a series of chuckles. "Don't you get to worryin' none, Miss Sally, I ain't goin' to lift a finger agin her, but Wilmerdine's gwine to get a lesson dat she shell remember for de rest ob her natchal life."

"You will have to begin soon then," remarked Sally, "because it has struck me lately that Uncle



Poodle is not quite so indifferent as he once was. I really think that maybe he is at last beginning to take notice."

"Huh!" Aunt Mandy tossed her head scornfully. "Don't let dat bothah you all for a minute, Miss Sally. Dat's just de man ob him. Dat won't las' long." Her mirth, gasping and wheezing, almost overcame her.

A sudden gust of wind swept through the kitchen. "It looks to me," said Sally, "as if we were going to have quite a touch of cool weather."

"Praise Gawd, I hope so." Aunt Mandy squinted her eyes at the sky. "All the better fo' me an' what I got on my hands. My Lawd, Miss Sally, whar Mis' Nesbit an' dat ol' Mis' Fuss-budget ob a Mis' Hill pacin' to dis mornin'?"

"They're making for the garden," replied Sally, also glancing through the window.

Mrs. Nesbit, muffled in shawls, moved along by the side of the more ponderous and self-reliant Mrs. Hill. At the entrance to the garden Mrs. Hill paused and gazed about her with lack-luster eye and pursed mouth.

"It's awful pretty, ain't it?" ventured Mrs. Nes-

bit timidly. "I always think a September garden's about the prettiest thing anybody can see."

"Humph!" Mrs. Hill gazed grudgingly about her. "It looks that way now, but next week or maybe sooner, to-morrow or to-day, there'll come a frost and these flowers that seem so bright and gay now will all be withered and gone, just wilted down to nothing. And since they are so soon to perish, Mis' Nesbit, supposin' you get me a spade and a little covered basket and I'll dig some of 'em up and try to save them."

Mrs. Nesbit hesitated visibly. "I don't know if that would be right. Don't you think we'd better ask Sally before we go to digging up her flowers?"

Mrs. Hill paused in the path and gazed at her companion with a sort of large, exasperated surprise. "Ain't you got any rights here at all after all the years you been doing Mis' Salt a favor by living with her?" she demanded. "Can't you even walk in the garden and pick a posy when you want to without her coming down on you?"

Mrs. Nesbit's face flushed and her chin trembled. "I can pick all the posies I like and you know it, Hetty Hill, but it's different when it comes to spad-

ing Sally's flowers up by the roots and carrying them off and never saying 'by your leave' to her."

Mrs. Hill's brow beetled, a deeper red crept up her cheek, and then she looked down upon her companion with a smile of pity and tolerance. "Can't you ever see things straight?" She spoke as one whose patience was worn thin by another's stupidly persistent lack of comprehension. "You act like I was trying to steal some of Mrs. Salt's flowers. I sometimes wonder, Mrs. Nesbit, that I stay friends with you at all, the way you go on, and I wouldn't, let me tell you that, I wouldn't if it wasn't for the Christian charity that's in me. Taking Mrs. Salt's flowers without her leave, indeed! Why, I wonder that you've got the face to stand there and look me in the eye. Humph! Why, if I could go down and buy out all Jim Simpson's conservatory, the same as Sally Salt does, don't you think I'd get a handsomer lot of flowers than these? Since I got to explain things to you, Melinda, like you was two years old, you might just as well understand, once and for all, that all I was trying to do was to help Mrs. Salt out. Look at these geraniums now, all crowded together, so not one of 'em could put out a new shoot

if they tried. And here I was willing to take my time and help Mrs. Salt by thinning them out a little, and because it would be a sin to throw away good geraniums, I was also willing to go to the trouble of taking them home and looking after them. And then what happens? You go flying off the handle and the same as tell me that I'm a thief!"

She had now successfully reduced Mrs. Nesbit to the state that that little creature was usually in at the close of one of her visits, mental confusion and outward and visible tears.

"I don't think you got any call to talk so to me, Hetty Hill," Mrs. Nesbit began with her invariable reproach, "and Lucy Parrish, she was saying only yesterday that instead of your visits cheering me up they always left me as unhappy as could be."

"Lucy Parrish!" repeated Mrs. Hill with fine scorn, "Lucy Parrish! She's a nice one to talk. Lucy Parrish had better keep a mighty still tongue in her head. Folks are talking good and plenty about her and John Witherspoon. John Witherspoon has always stood well in this community and been respected until lately, and some of the goings-on!" Mrs. Hill shut her mouth very tight and slowly

shook her head back and forth. "Well, that's all I got to say. I'm going now. You, Melinda Nesbit, that I always thought was one of the best friends that I had in the world, have not only called me a thief when I came to pay a friendly call, but have also informed me that I have been made a subject of gossip, and that you're willing to sit by the hour and listen to anything that a feather-headed piece of extravagance has got to say about me. Oh, well! I guess there's nothing more to be said. I'll be going now and for good."

Mrs. Nesbit plucked at her dress. "No, Hetty Hill, you don't need to go on like that, and you know it. Lucy didn't really say anything, and—and Hetty, instead of carrying home some flowers your ownself, if you'll just wait, I'll ask Sally if she won't send you over a real, big basket of nice plants to-morrow."

Mrs. Hill showed faint signs of becoming mollified. "Maybe I was hasty," she admitted generously. "But you should be more careful of what you say, Melinda. I don't for a minute believe that you mean all your biting speeches, but you should try and be more tactful."

"I know," murmured Mrs. Nesbit humbly, "and I am trying."

"Yes, and I know it ain't so easy for you, living with Sally Salt," Mrs. Hill conceded, "and you're the kind, Melinda, that lets her carry on as she pleases, ride over you rough shod if she's a mind to, and you never say one single word. Now, if it was me—"

They were opposite the porch by this time, and, arrested by a slight terrified movement on the part of Mrs. Nesbit, Mrs. Hill suddenly lifted her eyes to find Sally's gaze, intensely blue and full of a merciless mirth, fixed upon her.

"Now, really, what would you do, Mrs. Hill?" Sally had finished her spice cake, turned the baking of it over to Aunt Mandy, and hand in hand with Harris Hurd, who in some way managed to spend the greater part of his days with her, had sought the porch. She sat, as usual, on the top step in the full glow of the sunshine, the center of a happy family group of cats and dogs and Harris.

Mrs. Hill stopped short, made a hasty step forward, as if to stand not upon the order of her going; and then, recovering herself, stood enwrapped

in that remote and Buddhistic calm which was so unnerving to Mrs. Nesbit.

"Dear me, is that you, Mrs. Salt?" she exclaimed with admirably simulated surprise. "It seems to me that I understood you weren't at home." She cast an inquiring look at Mrs. Nesbit which made the little creature quail.

"So you thought it was a good time for the discussion of my tyrannies."

"Your tyrannies!" uncomprehendingly. "You only heard the beginning of what I was saying, Mrs. Salt, and the beginning of anything is no clue to the ending. If you'd a waited, you'd a probably heard something very different from what you expected." Mrs. Hill never hesitated to take higher ground than her accusers, no matter how difficult it might be to scramble there. "I think what you overheard, Mrs. Salt, was my saying to Melinda here that you sometimes *seemed* kind of rough shod, and that you sometimes *seemed* kind of peppery, that there was folks that even went so far as to say so, though for my part, I'd never seen anything of it; and if you'd only waited a minute, you'd a heard me begging Melinda not to listen to everything this



person or that person says, but to show a sperrit of love, always to show a sperrit of love." Mrs. Hill's voice soared and sank in her public utterance sing-song. "That's what we need, that's what we want," fervently, "that's what we got to show out in our lives." She closed her eyes, folded her hands and swayed slowly back and forth in a sort of an ecstatic trance. After a moment or two of this rapt meditation, she opened them again, and descended to more commonplace conversational levels.

"I was a-going to speak to-night in prayer meeting, felt it was about time to speak a word in season, here a little, and there a little, and I didn't know what subject to choose, and here it is right to my hand, the sperrit of love."

She waited a moment or two for a word of approval from Sally, but as none came, she adopted the easy, casual manner of the welcome visitor and sat down on the second step from the ground, heavily, it is true, and as she did so thrusting out one mastodonic leg and both arms in the effort to preserve her balance.

"That's a nice dog you've got there. What's **his** name?" she asked amiably. "A pretty cat, too!

Well, it's pleasant to have pets around, if you can afford to feed 'em."

"Harris," said Sally lazily, "don't bestow all your cookies on the dogs, give some to Mrs. Hill."

"Thank you kindly, Harris." Mrs. Hill regarded the thing proffered rather than the manner in which the offering was directed toward herself, and carefully selected two of the brownest and crispest cookies on the plate. "I think the last time I had the pleasure of eating any of your cake, Mrs. Salt, was down to Preacher's the other day.

" 'Mrs. Salt will do anything for me except come to hear me preach,' he says in his kind of joking way. 'She sends her choicest flowers to the church every Sunday, a wagon-load if we want 'em; she keeps us supplied with fresh fruit and vegetables, and it's always something nice to eat and something nice to wear for the wife and children.'

" 'Well,' I says very quiet, but I thought the time was ripe for saying it, 'well, Preacher, since Mrs. Salt has taken the stand that she won't come to hear your expositions from the pulpit, why some folks would be too proud to accept clothes for their backs and food for their mouths,' and I told him further

that if he really trusted the Lord, he'd take no thought for the morrow. Then his wife she started right in. My! That woman has a tongue. You mark my words. Every charge he gets by his word-painting she'll lose for him by hers."

"You never miss a chance to make others happy, do you, Mrs. Hill?" idly interrupted Sally.

"I ain't so particular about their being happy, that ain't what we're in the world for, but," modestly, "I do try to make 'em better."

"Then you ought to be the happiest person on earth. I really believe that the greatest thing in the world is always to feel dead sure that you're right." Sally spoke with a sort of passionate weariness.

It was unnoticed by Mrs. Hill, delicate shades of meaning, nuances of color in tone were lost upon her. Words were words. A primrose by the river's brim was to her emphatically a simple primrose, and since it was a mere wild flower and therefore cheap, it was an object more to be ignored than admired.

"Oh, no," she refused the laurel. "I don't know as I'd be claiming to be always right."

"Why not?" asked Sally. "Claim it all, Mrs.

Hill, claim it all. There's nothing to hinder you, certainly not yourself."

Her visitor smiled and accepted the tribute with complacency. "I hope not. I'd hate to stand in my own light. "Well," she rose to her feet, assisted by her umbrella, "I guess I'd better be going."

Sally, her head thrown back against a pillar of the porch, gazed far beyond the departing guest, her glance plunging into the very heart of the September splendor. So she sat dreaming. Harris lay, with his head on her knee, munching cookies. A great, pampered silver-gray cat was curled up in her lap, another, a tortoise shell, at her feet was engaged in contemptuous conversation by a collie, who testified his disapproval of her by punctuating her haughty disdain with occasional short, sharp barks, threatening in character, but entirely failing in intimidating effect. A golden brown Irish setter lay with his nose on Sally's other knee, turning watchful eyes on the indifferent, napping fluff of silver so near him and most loving eyes upon his mistress.

But Sally was not even half-conscious of any of them. This was autumn, the season when she and

Anthony had been happiest, the season which they had regarded as especially their own, when together they had gathered great clusters of grapes, dusky with purple bloom against their dark leaves, peaches and apples reddening more deeply every hour, the air rich with the musk of ripening fruit, the tang of cider; the year drawing to a golden completion, mellow, warm, as if the earth had treasured all the sunshine of the months in her heart and was now radiating it.

How she and Anthony had loved it! Free and careless, they had wandered through those sumptuous courts of September, unabashed, with heads up, laughing, rejoicing at the dazzle and glamour and magic of it. How the autumn had welcomed them! Cloth of gold for their feet to tread; banners of color flung to every breeze. The imperial purples! The kingly scarlets!

Ah, he and she had sighed deep, laughed free, been happy from opal dawn to violet night, when the harvest moon, "an orbéd maiden, with white fire laden" had stood for a moment on the crest of the low, dark hills and then floated upward through the infinite, blue ether. Sally could hear quite

plainly Anthony's voice apostrophizing her, that halting, hesitating voice, which could yet express all rich and sweet and plaintive cadences of sound :

“ ‘Oh, moon, pale siren, with wild eyes drinking  
The light of the sun as she sweepeth by

. . . . .

I am asking my heart if you pity or cherish  
The souls that you witch with the harvest call,  
If the dream must die when the dreamer perish,  
If it be idle to dream at all? ”

Almost she stretched out her arms, almost she cried, “Ah, let the world with its beggarly standards, its petty activities, its wearisome routines, its little worship of hours and days go, but leave me my dreams.” She looked out over her garden, and again Time was not. Again Anthony stood there with her, again he laughed at her and accused her of being a miser, of trying to steal all the color of the earth and sky and hoard it in her garden patch. The glow of it blended to a vital harmony, organ tones, strong and deep; scarlet salvias, masses of golden-glow, rows and rows of purple asters.

“Sally,” Harris' voice, small and aggrieved, broke

through her dreaming; "Sally, I've asked you about a hundred times, 'When will Mr. Streatham come again?'"

"He's here," she murmured, "here always. He never has gone, never can go."

Anne strolled up the path, a sunshade over her head. "Dear me," she said, "this is quite unusual to see you idle, Mrs. Salt, and not in the fields or breaking one of the horses."

"Occasionally I think," laconically.

"Do you ever read?" asked Anne. "I should think that you would find it a great rest and recreation in your busy life."

"Why should I play with other people's toys when I've got my own?" demanded Sally. "Why do I want to read other people's descriptions of life when I can live myself? And I've lived!" How she threw her head up! "And I will live. Not all the rain that ever fell can make me forget one hour of sunshine. I'll tell you what you had better do with all your dull, self-improving days, Anne, you throw them all on the scrap-heap of the world. Then live, give. It's all the same. It's only when we hold on to our pitiful rags of egotism, that we call self-respect and



proper dignity and all that sort of thing that we starve and freeze, and the more we wrap ourselves in them the colder and hungrier we get. Throw them away, Anne, and love down to the last cell of your heart, laugh from some inexhaustible spring of joy, suffer to the final throb of anguish, but don't whine. That's living. That's all that's worth while."

But Anne's spine had stiffened, Anne's mouth had pinched. "That sort of philosophy is the result of hours of idle dreaming. If one took your advice literally, how could one ever improve or progress?"

"Why not?" asked Sally. "Surely there is more than one road to perfection, and who shall say which is the best way. Funny thing, Anne, you make me think of old Mrs. Hobson. She set out early in life to live by line, rule and plummet. Method was her god, system represented to her the whole of the moral creed. She was continually saying, 'There's only one way to do a thing, and that's the right way.' The most awful thing that she could say about anybody was that they had no sense of responsibility. Sick or well she did her duty by every one about her so thoroughly that she swept all the joy out of their

lives. She had a way of putting her foot down and saying, 'I wouldn't put up with this or that in a man, husband or no husband.' And surely Mr. Hobson looked as if she lived up to it. He finally disappeared, just walked off and was never heard of again after he had stood about fifteen years of it. The rest of the family, boys and girls, are poor, spiritless creatures with just about enough life left in them to crawl about and not enough ever to hustle or really do anything. There isn't one of them that could possibly act on their own initiative, they had that all trained out of them. She was great in the training of children.

"That's the reason I spoil you so, Harris, as Anne evidently thinks; spoiling is good for some people, and you're one of them. But if you pull Silver's tail once again, I'm going to kiss you twenty times, and you know how you hate kisses, you boy-creature! Come on now, let's go and get some eggs for Aunt Mandy."

## CHAPTER XVII

### HILDA MAKES CONFESSION

**I**F alternate love and longing, anger, regret and resentment, had written certain lines about Sally's mouth and eyes, many conflicting and equally poignant emotions had not spared their fine etchings on Mrs. Hurd's remarkably unwrinkled countenance.

Each day of the departing summer had seemed to drag. The corn gave out its rich odors, the weeds grew more lush and springing, though soon to feel the first sharp blades of the frost, the hazes on the hills became every day more purple, the cobwebs began to float across the paths, but although Maria Hurd waited and watched as might a deserted maiden for her lover, Grissom did not come, and this month or two of anxious waiting had begun to tell even upon one so calm and impassive in temperament as Maria Hurd. Every day the slight pucker-

ing about the eyes and the faint drawn look about the mouth became more visible.

One morning as she moved about the kitchen, ostensibly occupied with household duties, she continually halted at the window or the open door to cast a sharp and more or less anxious glance at Mr. Hurd, who sat upon the porch looking over a bundle of letters and newspapers which had arrived a short time before. The letters had aroused her curiosity, and in some indefinable way, her suspicions; but when she had questioned him two or three times in regard to their contents and received only absent and unsatisfactory answers, she decided to await a more convenient season.

Presently her attention was arrested by a peculiar sound, something between an exclamation, a gasp, and a rattle in the throat. She turned quickly and ran out upon the porch.

"What's the matter?" she cried.

He did not answer her but sat staring at the hills as if for the first time he did not see them. His mouth had fallen slightly open and his face showed a bluish pallor. The paper was crumpled sharply in his hands, the letters had slipped to the ground.

"What's the matter?" she repeated sharply.

He looked up rather wildly and ran his trembling fingers through his hair. "The matter," he muttered. "Oh, oh,——" he groped for some explanation.

For another moment she surveyed him steadily and then sat down on the step.

"Something's happened," she announced. "Oh, you needn't be moving your head around nor half getting up as if to go away. Something's happened and you might as well tell me what it is."

Mr. Hurd rarely had any conversation with his wife and as rarely looked at her. When he did so it was with a manifest and shrinking distaste; it was evident now in his averted glance, his involuntary effort to escape.

"It is my own affair," making an ineffective effort to recover his dignity.

"Your own affair!" she repeated with slow, unmixed scorn. "I'd like to know what affairs you got and how you'd manage 'em if you had any. What are all those letters about?"

He moistened his lips once or twice. "Some investments I made," he muttered.

"Investments! You!" She looked at him now

more closely and curiously. She had long regarded him as half cracked, to use her own phraseology, but now it struck her that whatever wits he had possessed had completely deserted him.

He looked at her in piteous fashion and essayed to speak, but no words came; his gaze wandered beyond her, dwelling on the broad, rolling landscape, and gradually his whole expression underwent a marked and subtle change. His eyes no longer seemed sad and faded and old; they had regained their peculiar introspective, luminous glow; his figure straightened, he threw back his shoulders, taking a deep breath, and his hands ceased to tremble.

"You're always talking about money," he said, "and throwing it up to me that I didn't have the faculty of making it, so I began to think about it, too. I began to think that if we had money, we wouldn't be tied down here, that we could travel, see the deserts and oceans, and the mosques and temples and ruins and wonderful cities, and the mountains all covered with snow, and I got to thinking about it more and more, things kind of taking possession of me, you know, and to studying about

the way to make money, and then one day I saw an advertisement in the paper, an advertisement of a gold mine. It was a sure thing, way up in Alaska, and if you could buy a few shares it would be like an income coming in to you all the time, every year more and more. So I wrote to the firm that advertised it, and the letters I got from them were very convincing, very convincing indeed. They gave the whole history of the thing, and showed just why they needed the money now for development or they wouldn't let one share go out of their hands, and then they explained how nobody who came forward and took some shares could possibly lose. Well, there was some money of mine in the bank—"

"What!" she cried, leaning forward, her eyes narrowing until they seemed a mere line of hard metallic glitter, her face set in tense lines. "You mean to say that you drew money out of the bank and sent it off without consulting me!" She looked at him unbelievably. "No, you never did that."

"Yes, I did," he said simply. "And then, when I opened the paper this morning, I saw that the police had got after that firm, the firm I sent my money to, but they evidently suspected some move like that



and got away, for the police didn't find anything but empty offices. So I suppose the money's gone." Again he seemed to droop and shrink.

"Oh, my Lord!" The woman lifted her clenched hands and shook them above her head, and the gleam which shot from her narrowed eyes was still unrelentingly upon him, piercingly penetrating as a dagger thrust, burning as coals of fire. He writhed under it.

"What have I got to be punished for this way?" her harsh voice vibrating with long-repressed emotion. "What have I ever done? I've worked hard ever since I can remember, just to get along, just to be somebody in the world. That's all I ever cared about. And then I met you and was taken in by you. I was young and I was caught by your queer talk and your handsome face. You had a little money, and I thought from your fine talk that you'd make a lot more, that you'd be somebody in the world. And, oh, Lord! Look at what I got! Look at what I've had all these years! I hadn't been married to you very long before I learned about what I had to expect—that you were good for nothing on God's earth but to sit and dream. Put you

to plowing, and like as not you'd be sitting on the plow in the middle of a field, you and the horses both dreaming. And save money! You got no more idea of saving than a tree has when it's losing its leaves in the fall. I'm all that stands between this family and starvation, and sooner or later they can starve as far as I am concerned. I'll never take the little that I've saved here and saved there to keep food in their mouths and a roof over their heads. I know that. Oh," in another burst of exasperation, "if I could just get rid of all of you and have a little house all to myself, where I could save and plan and manage just as I'd like! And I will, too! I will!"

Without another glance at her husband, she rose and walked into the house. A door was heard to slam, and it was understood by those of her household, versed in her ways, that she had retired to her own chamber for a season, as was her wont when in one of her black moods.

It was two or three hours before she emerged, and then she entered the kitchen, tied on a discarded apron, and resumed her various customary activities as if nothing had occurred to disturb the routine of her day. Her face had resumed its usual calm, im-

passive expression, but there was a new light of determination in her eyes.

Hilda stood by the window, she had looked up when her mother entered, and then turned again to watch the bees drifting over the morning-glories which clustered about the frame. Idly she leaned there, watching the delicate color trumpets expand in the sunshine. She had begun to sing a few moments before, half under her breath, but had gradually gone on until, forgetful of herself, she had let out her voice to its full volume. As she trilled happily on some especially high note, her mother, who had been casting glances at her full of a somber irritation, began a great clatter of dishes, exclaiming at the same time in deep, peremptory tones:

"Hilda, I wish you would shut up!"

Hilda started violently, threw a half-frightened glance at her mother, and ceased in the middle of a trill, then made a movement as if to leave the room, but Mrs. Hurd intercepted her.

"Hilda," she said suavely, yet with that deep, harsh note of a new and sinister determination running through her voice, "Hilda, I been pretty patient. I can wait as good as anybody in the world,

and I find that it usually pays me to be patient; but there's a matter that's got to be settled between you and me, and I guess now is as good a time as any to talk it over. I've been thinking considerably lately, and it strikes me that a guess I've got is pretty nearly correct."

The girl did not speak, merely shrank back more closely against the window-sill and clasped her hands tightly with a quick involuntary motion upon her breast.

"Now, one of the things I want to know," her mother's voice went on evenly, "is why you never hear from Grissom?"

Hilda shivered slightly at the mention of his name, the soft tea-rose color left her cheek, but she shook her head without answering.

"Oh, it doesn't do any good to shake your head and not answer me, because I mean to find out," said Maria Hurd, "and you'll gain nothing by being obstinate. Now answer me. Why did Grissom never come back, and why do you never hear from him?"

But Hilda did not answer; merely closed her lips and gazed far above her mother's head. Her eyes

were luminous with some high resolve, but her lips trembled a little.

Her mother walked over and in her usual leisurely fashion locked the door and put the key in her pocket. She knew the nature with which she had to deal, and this was not the first time that this sort of a scene had been enacted between them.

"Come, Hilda," she said, "you'd better answer quick; there's no use in wasting time."

The girl made no answer beyond another shake of the head. Then slowly and steadily she was put under fire. Again and again she was asked the question in the same monotonous, implacable voice. Again and again she refused to answer.

An hour ticked by, two hours, and Hilda began to show the strain. The color glowed brilliantly in her cheeks and ears, and pulsed up and down her neck. She became as tense as a highly keyed violin; her hands began to tremble, and then her whole body.

Two hours and a half. The whole delicate balance of her nature gave way. She turned at bay, her face aflame, her eyes sparkling with fire.

"If you want to know!" she cried, her voice high

and shrill and triumphant, "if you want to know, I'll tell you now, when it can't help either you or Jake Washburne to know. I overheard you and Jake talking the night you planned, oh, God! planned to sell Mr. Grissom for money—not because either of you cared whether what he had done was right or wrong, but because you wanted the money. That was all either of you thought of in your cruel, wicked, grasping hearts. But I overheard, yes, I did, and I stole out and sent word to him, and now he is safe from you, safe, and you'll never get your money. Never!"

Mrs. Hurd stood as if petrified, her face growing whiter and whiter, her chest heaving in long breaths.

"You overheard Jake and me," she said at last, as if it were entirely beyond her power to grasp that fact in itself, as if there were no possibility of its having reached her ears correctly, "and you went off by yourself and warned Grissom, sent word to him not to come back." She spoke the words as if they were incredible, beyond belief. For a few silent moments she surveyed her daughter from under frowning brows, curiously, uncomprehendingly, as if she had really never seen her before.

"You heard Jake say there was twenty-five hundred dollars in it, twelve hundred and fifty dollars apiece; and sure money, and yet you crept off and warned Grissom!" Then suddenly her slow, incredulous tone was merged in a furious utterance.

"You stole it! That's what you've done—stole it from me, your mother!" The dead white of her face was tinged with a faint, creeping purple; her voice was raucous, and she put her hand to her throat, as if she felt it become constricted through the violence of her emotions.

"Now, let me tell you, you can't do such things. You think I'm going to slave and cook for you, and buy the very clothes that's on your back, to have you steal twelve—hundred—dollars from me?" Her whole figure went flaccid and seemed to bow and cringe before the sum.

"Twelve hundred dollars snatched right out of my hand by a worthless—!" Her voice broke in a kind of choking snarl. Then she restrained herself by a supreme effort of will.

"You may think you're grown up, Hilda—fine and grown up, after the smart trick you've played, but you'll find out different. Oh, what have I



done!" she lifted her hands and shook them in a frenzy, "that I should be the mother of such a whey-faced fool! It's plain to be seen where you get your craziness, from that daft father of yours. Oh, to think of the years that I've borne with you both, worked and slaved and toiled for you! And what have I ever got out of either of you? Have you ever been anything but a drag and a burden on me? But I've stood it as long as I'm going to. Do you hear?" There was a still and dreadful menace in her voice. She walked over, and, unlocking the door, threw it wide. "The only reason I've kept you around was because of the looks of the thing, but that's past now—that's past for ever since you stole from me—stole twelve hundred and fifty dollars! You!"

She continued to regard her daughter with the same odd incredulity, as if Hilda were a thing too monstrous and impossible to be believed in. And, as she gazed, some violent yet still convulsion of nature seemed to be taking place in her. The purple which had faintly tinged her face now surged up it in a purple tide; for a second she swayed back and forth, clenching and unclenching her hand, and then

she sprang at the girl with the hoarse, snarling cry of some wild animal.

"Get out! get out! and never let me see your face again! Get out before I drive you out!"

The words came through her constricted throat with difficulty, but all the pent-up antagonism of a lifetime was in her voice.

Hilda shrank and cowered. To her excited vision her mother suddenly towered above her. She was like some baffled beast of the jungle, her lips slathered with foam, her great arms stretched outward as if to seize her prey, her fleshy fingers turned in like curving claws. And Hilda fled like a fawn before a tigress, and heard, as she ran through the garden and down toward the meadows, the heavy slam of a door behind her.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE QUEST OF THE ROAD

OVERPOWERED by terror, Hilda had run on and on, not even consciously noting the direction she was taking, until at last, from sheer inability to run longer, she stopped, and, panting for breath, looked dazedly about her. She was in the heart of a great corn-field, beneath a lowering sky. The corn shocks encompassed her and seemed to radiate in every direction from the point on which she stood. On and on they stretched, their long, unbroken rows savagely yellow under the rolling clouds, blue-black above the distant hills.

Hilda stood for a moment gazing wildly about her, drawing long, convulsive, sobbing breaths, and then, following some instinctive impulse to seek shelter, she sank down beside one of the corn shocks and crouched forlornly against it. The wind rustled the dry leaves of the corn, the whole field was full

of arid, eery whispers, but Hilda did not hear them. All about her, strewn over the brown earth, were great pumpkins, and a flock of blackbirds, glistening metallicly, walked mincingly among them, but she did not see them. No plan for the immediate future came to her; she was incapable of any concentrated thought, and merely cowered there in a maze of bewilderment and dull misery.

Finally some far-off sound attracted her attention, and involuntarily she lifted her head to listen. Faint and far away there came to her the sound of her own name. "Hilda! Hilda!" a plaintive, quavering note of anxiety and helplessness. Hilda's mental processes were so disorganized that she might have heard many repetitions of her name in an unfamiliar voice and paid no heed to them, but now her heart, her sore and aching heart, responded at once to that anguished appeal. She sprang to her feet and looked about her. At first she could see nothing, but, gazing steadily in the direction of the repeated call, she saw her father surmount a little knoll and stand peering eagerly over the field. He was hatless, and his long black coat and white beard were blowing in the wind. Hilda stumbled over the

field toward him, longing to reassure and comfort and solace him.

"Father! father!" she cried high and clear, and he, hearing and seeing her, began also to run. When they met, with a little cry of joy he folded her tightly in his arms.

"Hilda, my little Hilda," he crooned over her, and rocked her back and forth, "I didn't know where you had gone, and I've looked for you so long. She," he shuddered, "she told me she had driven you out, and I came, too. I—I only waited to put on my Sunday coat, Hilda."

She laughed a little weeping laugh of tender amusement. "But you forgot your hat, father," she said, and pressed her cheek more deeply into his shoulder.

"We've, we've been turned out, Hilda." He strove to speak seriously, but there was a sort of excited joy in his voice and manner.

"Oh, father, you too!" she cried, and, clasping him closer still, fell to an almost hysterical sobbing.

He tenderly stroked her hair. "Don't cry, Hilda," soothingly, "my little honey. There, there. You'll never be turned out by your father, Hilda,

and Hilda—Hilda, look up here.” There was a furtive, wavering smile on his thin lips, a shy exultation in his eyes, as if he were about to tell her some wonderful secret. “The world’s all before us, Hilda.”

The world! Hilda lifted her head and looked about her. Long rows of corn shocks under a dark, bending sky; the trees upholding their high autumnal torches on the far hillsides, and beyond them miles of forest gloom, and then more unending corn fields and waste brown meadows. “The world’s a long way off, father.”

He shook his head. To his brooding gaze the towers and castles of his eternal city of romance shone fair before his eyes. He caught the nearer gleam of its beauty in the fugitive shimmer of sunlight that broke through the clouds and played for a moment about them.

“Why, the city is quite near, Hilda,” he said impatiently, “not a long distance by rail, and if we should walk—”

But the timid spirit of Hilda, more practical, because more feminine, protested. “What shall we do after we get there?” she asked piteously.

He looked at her in surprise, as if perplexed at her stupidity. "Why, there's plenty to do in the city," he replied, an answer which, however vague to another, was yet completely satisfactory to himself. "Come on, Hilda."

Her spirit was only a little, only a very little, more practical than his own, so, with no more thought of further protestation, she turned and they started off together. The old man's gaze was almost ecstatic as he swept the landscape. "Do you remember what the Lord said to Moses, Hilda? 'Go forward!' Well, the Lord speaks to us now the same as He did then."

"Yes, father," she answered obediently, trudging beside him.

"The shortest way to the city is by the river road," said the old man. "It will take about three days of steady walking, Hilda. We shall have fine weather," buoyantly, although there was nothing in the signs of the sky to presage any such a condition, "and people along the way will give us something to eat and let us sleep in their barns." His eyes glowed with the light of adventure. "Ah, Hilda," his eager stride took him a foot or two ahead of her,



the words were blown back over his shoulder to her, "we're going there, out into the world that I have always dreamed about, but I never could get away from here before, and now, at last, I'm going to find out what lies beyond the hills."

And Hilda's heart, too, began to rise, and, harp that she was, she vibrated in unison with the strong hand that swept the strings. Under the stimulus of his words she, too, felt the glow and excitement that the thought of those beckoning, twinkling lights of the distant city aroused.

As they turned into the river road Hilda pointed out to her father the many signs of warning to trespassers.

"It is John Witherspoon's land," he replied. "He probably wishes to preserve the quail."

The blue-black clouds so long massed on the horizon were now rolling overhead; the storm was imminent; it was a matter of a few moments before it was upon them; but the thick growth of the trees broke the long sweep of the rising wind, and in the woods it was like a low, monotonous sob.

"I hear some one coming," said Hilda suddenly, pausing and glancing about her.

"Do you?" said her father. "No doubt." He, too, stopped and waited, listening.

There was the faint sound of dry leaves and twigs crackling under an advancing footfall; nearer it came, and then, turning the angle of the road, appeared Anthony Streatham. He did not at first see the old man and the girl. He was whistling softly, his eyes bent on the ground. In one hand he held a rod, and in the other a string of fish, gleaming silver.

He started involuntarily at the sight of the intruders, twisted his mouth in a vexed grimace, and then, with a characteristic shrug of the shoulders, fatalistically accepting the inevitable, and at the same time disclaiming all responsibility and shifting it to the knees of the gods, where it belonged, he greeted them with his delightful smile.

But Hilda stared at him as one raised from the dead. "Why," she stammered, "why, when did you come back, Mr. Streatham?"

"Ah, that is a long story. Tell me first," he said, to gain time, "what you two are doing here so far from home, and at this hour in the evening?"

Hilda's head sank shamedly, and the deep color

tinged even her brow; but Mr. Hurd drew himself up magnificently. "My daughter and I are about to travel; in fact, we are going to the city."

"But you are not walking?"

"We thought of doing so; it seemed the pleasanter way," said Mr. Hurd.

Anthony's eyebrows and shoulders went up imperceptibly, but, as ever, he was quick to take his cue.

"Ah, the quest of the open road!" he said pleasantly. "There is nothing like it. Under those circumstances, I shall insist on your making the first break in your journey by taking supper with me and stopping the night. Yonder, through the trees, is my lodge in the wilderness."

He indicated a little cabin, half hidden by trees, and standing on the rocky ledge above the river. It was the same hut to which he and Sally had ridden months before in her search for more laborers—the same, but vastly improved.

Hilda and her father, entering the low door, broke into simultaneous exclamations of pleasure. The place was neat and shipshape to a degree, clean as a pin, and with an odd sort of attractiveness. A

little fire of logs burned on the hearth. There was a table with books, a couch covered with a bright Navajo blanket and some pillows, even a small piano, and on the rough walls pine branches, the green tracery of beauty, permeating the air with their faint, aromatic fragrance.

"Here, Hilda." Streatham had drawn a large chair near the fire, and with a fleeting glance of gratitude Hilda sank wearily into it. Her fair head fell back among the pillows; her lashes lay long on her cheeks; there were deep bluish shadows about her eyes.

Anthony busied himself for a moment or two lighting a lamp. "Now, Mr. Hurd, here are some books and papers, if you care to look them over while I get supper."

Hilda half rose as if to offer her assistance, but Streatham laid a hand on her shoulder and pressed her gently back into her chair. "No, Hilda; remember that to-night you are my guest, and that I am your humble servitor, and later, just to gratify a certain absurd sense of honesty which I see lurking in your eyes, you shall pay for your supper, oh lady of the silver voice. Now I shall go to my little

kitchen here in the rear, and you are not to peep; you are to do nothing until you are summoned."

Hilda, pale Hilda, could hardly murmur her gratitude, and Anthony vanished into the kitchen, not to appear again until he stood in the doorway, half an hour later, with the odors of coffee and frying fish wafting pleasantly about him, and, flourishing a fork with a grand air, announced that supper was served.

Among his various accomplishments, he had carried the art of cookery to a high degree of perfection, but his conversation did more to revive and restore Hilda than food. In listening to his jests and banter she forgot the tragedy of the morning; and then she relied instinctively on the strength and judgment which would devise comfort for them, would save them, although she would not have admitted this intuitive conclusion even to herself, from the pitfalls of her father's star-gazing optimism.

Streatham accepted readily enough her offer of assistance after supper. He intended by a few judicious questions to discover the cause of the Hurd exodus—not a difficult matter, as it proved. He was one of the few people to whom Hilda could

always talk freely, and now she hastened to pour forth her confidence.

He lifted his shoulders higher about the ears than he usually managed to do in a shrug, and twisted his mouth almost up to one eye. As Sally had once said, when nothing else happened the Hurds were sure to. This was a situation, he reflected, which he would certainly not have gone on winged feet to meet, but since it had come to him there was nothing to do but accept it, at least for the present.

"Hilda," he said, "you can not journey to town with your father. I am sorry to destroy his and incidentally your dreams of strolling along the sun-lit roads, while the farmers en route chain up the dog at the sight of you and rush out to meet you with flagons of milk in one hand and bread and honey in the other, and of sleeping in fragrant straw beside blossoming hedge-rows beneath the golden moon; but I'm afraid your journey ends here, Hilda."

She shook her head, a slight disappointed droop to her mouth. "Father will go on now," she said, "now that he really can, that there is nothing to stop him."

"I shall stop him. If I let him go, I'd be as morally responsible as a mother who would put a new-born babe to sleep on a railway track."

"He will go," she insisted.

Anthony lifted his eyebrows almost to the roots of his hair. "Father will be managed," he said gently. "Hilda, you've never seen a play, have you? You shall see one now. Come, you shall have what will appear to you the large easy chair by the fire, but which is in reality the stage box; and you shall see, without any preliminary bursts from the orchestra, the curtain rise on 'The Management of Father.'"

Hilda laughed irrepressibly, but her eyes were puzzled. "I hardly ever understand you, Mr. Streatham, but what you say always makes me laugh. I like the sound of it."

He stopped and looked at her closely from under his eyebrows, nodding his head the while. "That is you," he said. "Hilda, I have discovered you. You take in everything by the sound. You see nothing. You have ears and a voice, but no eyes. But come, the curtain rises. 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother.' 'On such a night, Jessica.'"



Mr. Hurd sat reading by the light of the lamp, completely absorbed in his book. He put it down with some reluctance when Hilda and Anthony finally made their presence known to him. "A beautiful book," he said wistfully, "a very beautiful book. I am afraid I shall not have time to finish it, however. We must get an early start to-morrow morning."

"Ah," said Anthony, leaning forward, as if the matter had just occurred to him, "that is a question I wish to discuss with you. Let us, tiresomely, I admit, descend to practicalities. Here are three of us whom chance has brought together. You two are going on to town. I would gladly go with you, but my travels have taught me that he who would pass through the world easily must have a passport in the shape of a coin always ready. Now, when I start out to do a thing, build a fire, for instance, I don't want to be hampered every minute for lack of wood; and, comrades on the road, there is my entire capital." He threw on the table a handful of silver.

Mr. Hurd, involuntarily following his example, searched in his pockets, and then searched again. At last he looked up with an expression of surprise

not unmingled with sheepishness. "Why, why, I had some money, several dollars, I think. Why, Hilda—"

"Yes, father, but you changed your coat."

He drew his long-tailed, old-fashioned coat about him and looked down at it in a puzzled sort of way.

"Why, so I did, Hilda, so I did."

"That settles it." Anthony rubbed his chin and smiled at Hilda. "There will be no play. I am sorry to disappoint you, my child, but the curtain is rung down before it goes up, to speak the ancient Celtic tongue. That is usually the way. Destiny will decide most of our problems for us if we will only let her. Now, the state of my exchequer, at present, entirely precludes the idea of my financing this Argonautic expedition. Then this is the situation." He addressed his remarks now exclusively to Mr. Hurd, speaking with convincing gravity. "I know the city thoroughly, and if I could accompany you on your journey I could act admirably as your guide; but, owing to the slimness of my purse, it is impossible for me to go now. I am here, I should explain, to do some special writing. Witherspoon lent me this cottage that I might have the necessary

seclusion, and for the next few weeks I must keep at it very steadily; consequently, it would be a tremendous help to me if you and Hilda would consent to remain here temporarily. Hilda shall take care of the household duties," there was a faint twinkle in Anthony's eyes, "and you can assist me in the heavier tasks, hewing the wood and carrying water; and then I shall write, and you shall read, and I hope that there will be many times when we may converse. How does it strike you?"

Mr. Hurd leaned his head on his hand and considered, his eyes fixed on the fire. Some of their luminous glow had vanished. He was very tired, and the city of his dreams was a long way off. He hated to defer his quest of life by even an hour; nevertheless, he could not conceal the fact that his pleasure would be greatly enhanced by the society of this cheery, congenial companion, this man who knew the purlieus of the world.

"It would certainly delay us a little in our journey," he hesitated.

"But not for long, father." The light had returned to Hilda's eyes, the color to her cheeks. She laid one hand appealingly on his knee. "Just for a

little while, and Mr. Streatham will go with us then."

Again the old man looked about him; he was tired, tireder than he had thought, and here was peace and comfort, and books, and the companionship of this delightful scamp. The ivory towers and purple distances, the roaring streets all dusk and spangled with lights, grew a little dimmer. He laid his white head back against the chair. "I have an idea," he said to Anthony, "that in this instance your wisdom exceeds mine."

Hilda smiled at him radiantly.

"Now, Hilda," said Streatham, "pay for your supper. Sing."

## CHAPTER XIX

### ANTHONY'S STRANGE LETTER

"**A**UNT MANDY," asked Sally, one morning, "how does it happen that every time I enter the kitchen I meet Uncle Poodle either coming in or going out, or else comfortably ensconced by the stove. Have you at last given your consent to Wilmerdine's wooing?"

"Lawd! Miss Sally, you go on." Aunt Mandy waved a dish towel in the air and chuckled, well pleased. "Didn't I tole you dat I had my own plan fo' de subduin' of Wilmerdine? Jus' 'cause I spile dat girl, an' you spile her, an' she grows up so purty an' have so many beaux dat her haid is clean turned around on her shoulders, is dat any reason we all got to keep on spilin' her? No'm, no ma'am!" emphatically. "I was certainly one of dese yer po' dotin' mothahs, jus' like hundreds of othahs, pleased as Punch to see Wilmerdine queenin' it over a lot

of nice, likely boys. But when I saw her startin' in after Uncle Poodle, why, dat was de cuff on de ear dat wake dis sleepin' princess right up. For I saw then dat she had not growed beyond a mothah's love an' care.

"Well, I give de mattah considerable study, Miss Sally, an' I come to dis conclusion. Blossom!" she broke off to address her large gray cat, "ef you can't keep from gettin' under my feet, I'm goin' to break dis yer broomstick over yo' back. Now yo' mind. I was tellin' yo', Miss Sally, dat I come to dis conclusion: Uncle Poodle, self-respectable as he is, an' proud of his position of bein' one of de bes' exhorters in de chu'ch, is only a man at bes', jus' like a mouse is only a mouse, an' no mattah how smart and quick on his foots he is, sooner or later de cat dat's watchin' him's goin' to get him. Den," she paused dramatically, "I jus' walked in myself."

"No!" cried Sally, flatteringly impressed by this evidence of strategic genius. "Who ever heard of such a thing?" She burst into a peal of laughter.

"Dat's right," affirmed Aunt Mandy proudly. "Ain't yo' noticed how I been settin' up to him? He is fond of a dish of bacon an' greens cooked jus'

so, an' a cup of coffee he do dearly love. So when I see him comin' up from de gyarden, kin' o' hot an' tired wid weedin' or hoein' or such like, I'd station myself in de window wid a steamin' coffee pot held kind o' absent-like in one hand, an' den he'd kind o' sniff an' go slow, an' I'd say, as surprised as yo' please, 'Oh, Uncle Poodle, is dat you? I was jus' pourin' myself a cup o' coffee; won't yo' jine me?' Well, once here, wid a plate o' batter cakes before him, an' no stint of butter an' molasses, he wasn't in no hurry to leave, I can tell you dat, Miss Sally. An' bimeby, when he'd et through dis or dat knick-knack, he'd be ready to talk, an' we'd begin on de chu'ch, discussin' or disputin' how dis or dat difficulty is goin' to be met an' dat expense faced. All such subjects, yo' know, dat his mind's full of, an' dat Wilmerdine ain't got no grasp on at all. Why, dat man has set here by de hour in de evenin's, relatin' his speritual experiences an' cogitatin' on dis brothah or dat sistah dat has backslid in ways dat it ain't fitten fo' no young girl like Wilmerdine to be discussin'.

"When Wilmerdine see how things is goin', she kin' o' open her eyes, I can tell you. Dat girl, she



thinks she know it all, Miss Sally, 'cause she ain't never had no trouble in twistin' every boy she meet around her fingers; but she findin' out now how little she really know ob de world. She thought all she got to do to catch any man was to roll her big eyes at him, an' when she see Uncle Poodle was payin' no 'tention to her tricks, why, she kin' o' console herself wid de reflection dat Uncle Poodle was so old and pious dat he couldn't set up to anybody; but it seems like her po' ol' mothah was divinely app'inted to show her different.

"Why, Miss Sally, yesterday, when Uncle Poodle was a-settin' here by de stove samplin' some plum pie dat I had jus' turned out, an' kin' o' sippin' at a glass ob milk dat was more'n half cream, I could see in his eyes dat he was turnin' over an' over in his mind ef he wouldn't be askin' me to marry him."

"Marry him!" echoed Sally dazedly. "Aunt Mandy, you wouldn't think of such a thing."

"'Deed, no, Miss Sally. I'm too old to bother my head 'bout any man. I past de time when I'm willin' to caper an' keep 'em in a good humor an' feed 'em up. No, ma'am. I wants to set down by de stove when my work's done an' smoke my pipe

an' doze. Me an' Blossom was talkin' things over las' night. I says, 'Blossom, what kin' ob a fool do yo' think I'd be to undertake the care ob any rheumatic ol' niggah at my time of life?' an' Blossom she look up at me an' kin' o' wink her eye and den shet 'em tight again, an' fold her paws under her an' doze. No, ma'am; my days of botherin' wid de men folks is over, an' I'm glad of it, too."

"I can see that Wilmerdine looks at you with a new respect," said Sally.

"She'd better." Aunt Mandy chuckled afresh.

At this moment Wilmerdine entered and announced to Sally that Mr. Witherspoon wished to see her, and Sally went out on the porch, where Witherspoon stood on the step awaiting her, his horse's bridle over his arm. It struck Sally that he looked a little constrained, and his manner, in a way, bore out his appearance.

"Good morning," she said. "Are you and Lucy off for a ride?"

"Yes, I am waiting for her."

"One is always waiting for Lucy," laughed Sally. "But we have to admit that when she does appear the results justify the delay."

"But, after all," Witherspoon said, "it was you I particularly wished to see." The constraint which she had felt so unmistakably was visible now in his voice. It was almost embarrassed.

"Me!" cried Sally, opening her eyes.

"Yes." He searched in his pocket a moment. "I have something for you, a letter which was inclosed in one I received."

Sally grew white under all her tan. Slowly she stretched out her hand. "Please give it to me," she said, and turning, without even a word of thanks, left him.

Down through her summer garden she went, a waste and desolate place, its glory departed, its color and perfume but a memory. One day they had flung their challenge of beauty at the sunlight, and the next they were fallen under the blight of frost, ready for Uncle Poodle's scythe and pruning-hook. The brown beds and trim paths were all in their decorous and depressing winter order, and Sally passed rapidly through them down to her sheltered and still splendid chrysanthemum borders, the wonderful gardens of autumn. She sat down on a seat under a maple tree; the gold and flame of its

leaves fell softly through the air; the dreamy late October sunshine lay on her red hair, and there she opened and read Streatham's letter.

So he was on the other side of the world! It was a long letter. Some of the paragraphs were written at sea, some were from Paris, one or two from London, and one was from Rome. He had written exactly as if they had never parted, as if she had never driven him from her.

"Sally of my heart, is it really true that I am here and you are there? Incredible! Away from you now, when 'the days take on a mellower tint, and the apple at last hangs really finished and indolent ripe on the tree'? Again I say, incredible!

"I was dowered at birth with the wanderlust, but do you know, in its last analysis, what the wanderlust really is? It is the imperative, overwhelming desire to get away from 'here.' It doesn't really matter in the least where 'here' happens to be; the wanderlust is an unspeakable longing to get away from it. And now that I am here and ready to start off at a moment's notice for that vanishing 'there,' with which I never seem to catch up, and which, like to-morrow, is always beyond me, I discover

hourly what I have always known from the first minute I saw you—that all I really want in the world is to be with you, you, Sally darling, with you, where ‘here’ and ‘there’ meet. ‘Oh, love and summer, you are in the dreams and in me.’

“When are you going to send for me, Sally? Soon, soon—”

She dropped the letter and clenched her teeth. “I can’t—I can’t bear it!” she cried. “As if you had done nothing! As if you were forgiving me, and overlooking my conduct! As if I had sent you away for a mere whim!”

She was pale no longer; the high, hot color flamed in her cheeks; her eyes flashed. She read no more, but, folding the letter, thrust it in the bosom of her gown and strode up toward the house, frowning, muttering, flushing and paling—in a fine temper, in short.

Upon the porch were a little group of three—Mrs. Nesbit, Mrs. Hill and Anne—all sitting with their heads together in the full tide of a discussion, so earnest and absorbed that an observer would have been justified in predicting the element of scandal.

Mrs. Hill had flung her bonnet strings back over

her shoulders, and had now firmly grasped her umbrella. There was an air of almost majestic importance about her, a zest, an eagerness, as if one who, having been long compelled to make the most of what little she had—spread the butter thin, in fact—had at last not only a plenitude of butter, but was also prepared to dispense jam with a generous hand. And she held her audience, there was no doubt of that. Mrs. Nesbit, huddled in shawls and with a crocheted white and pink fascinator thrown over her head, its point dangling over her nose, was leaning forward with a sort of frightened eagerness. Anne sat uncompromisingly upright, the slight frown upon her brow negatived by the faintly complacent and superior smile upon her lips.

As an experienced purveyor of news, Mrs. Hill was not one to hurl down the bone and then watch the dogs worry it. That is, to phrase it in the language of the drawing-room, she did not announce her knowledge and then listen, well content, to the endless discussion of it from those to whom she proffered it. Far from it. Her methods were more subtle, more civilized, even cultivated. She tempted the palate, disdaining no humble little appe-

tizers; then, through the lighter courses of soup, fish, an entree or so, she led up to her *pièce de résistance*, the solid, substantial roast.

On ascending the steps to the porch, where Mrs. Nesbit sat sunning herself in the mild, pale sunshine for an hour or two, and, because October had reached its end, had wrapped herself in shawls, and where Anne sat beside her, making some notes on a volume she held in hand, she had accepted the offer of a chair, refused to go indoors, untied her bonnet strings, and panted a moment or two before essaying any continuous conversation.

"Yes, it's a nice morning," in response to Mrs. Nesbit's timid bleat in praise of the day, "but it ain't seasonable, and it ain't healthy. Keeps on like this, we'll have a green Christmas, and," with a long-drawn sigh, "you know what that means—a fat churchyard. Well," with another long sigh, "I guess, whether Christmas is green or white, the churchyard won't be so slim this year. One of the Smith twins is down with scarlet fever, a bad case, they say, and I stopped to talk to Mrs. Potter a minute at her gate, and she says her cough's worse than it's been for twenty years. She says if it's like



'tis now, what will it be in February and March? I didn't tell her so, but she needn't bother her head about February or March. She won't last that long. She had to hold on to the gate posts while she was talking to me. You never heard a more rattling cough, Melinda."

"Is that so?" said Mrs. Nesbit. "Why, I must get right over to see her."

"Yes, Melinda, go," replied Mrs. Hill, "and I'd advise you to go soon. Had you heard that that Jennison girl, the oldest one, was going into a decline? I thought if I felt pretty good I'd walk over this afternoon and take a look at her. Hm-m, what makes you look so peaked, Melinda?"

"Me?" Mrs. Nesbit's nerves were not proof against the question and the cold steady searchlight of Mrs. Hill's glance, which seemed to discover an organic weakness wherever she gazed. "I—I never felt better in my life."

"You'd ought to take care of yourself," said Mrs. Hill in calm, unconvinced tones. "I don't think I've ever seen you look any worse. A tonic might help, but I dunno," shaking her head lugubriously. "Well, you ain't the only one that's got troubles.

I stopped to see Mrs. Hurd a minute, and it seems she's all alone there with Harris. Hilda and her father gone traipsin' off somewhere, and just to show you what that poor woman has to put up with, Mrs. Nesbit, they never even told her they meant to go, and she's no idea on earth where they've gone. Oh, they're the crazy pair. I tell you, Melinda, nobody knows what that poor woman's had to put up with. She's quiet and ain't got much to say for herself, and folks ain't really never stopped to think of all she's bore. It's pretty hard sometimes to just be a poor, weak woman and to have to depend on a critter like Hurd."

"But surely," interposed Anne, "she has never attempted to depend on Mr. Hurd, a strong, capable woman like herself."

"He's her husband, ain't he?" said Mrs. Hill coldly, "and who else has a woman got to depend on? Mighty queer things happen around here, I can tell you that." She had at last arrived at the roast. "But I guess this here Streatham business is about the queerest of all."

"Streatham!" Mrs. Nesbit and Anne both echoed her words simultaneously, and Sally paused in the

path below at the sound of their voices. Then, all aflame as she was, she walked up the steps and stood directly before Mrs. Hill, her head thrown back, and her blue glance shining burningly through her half-closed lids.

"What about Mr. Streatham, Mrs. Hill? What interesting bit of gossip do you know now about him?"

"Good morning, Mrs. Salt." Mrs. Hill was ever mindful of her manners. "It's a pleasant morning, isn't it? Oh, about Mr. Streatham. I was as surprised as ever was when I heard yesterday that he hadn't ever gone away after all."

"What!" Sally was off guard now, bending forward, lips, eyes, whole eager face questioning, never attempting to conceal her passionate interest.

"Just that. He ain't ever gone away."

"But he has," asseverated Sally Salt. "What do you mean by saying such a thing?"

Mrs. Hill drew her cape about her with dignity. "I'm saying nothing but what I know," she replied with an icy positiveness. "One of the boys has been nutting, and he says he's seen Streatham more than once in John Witherspoon's woods; that he's

living there in that little cabin on the river, and that he's been there right along. Why, I supposed you knew it all the time, Mrs. Salt."

"It's a lie," said Sally obstinately, and walked blindly into the house.

In the seclusion of her own room, the door securely locked against all possible intruders, she sank down into a chair, trembling, sobbing. What did this mean? This new development of a torturing situation. Oh, it was true. She didn't doubt it. It was exactly like Anthony. She drew the letter from her bosom, her half-unread letter, and tore it to tatters, drawing deep, sobbing breaths the while, and blindly scattered the pieces all over the room.

"Liar!" she cried with explosive anguish. "Oh, Anthony, you liar!"

## CHAPTER XX

### LUCY TAKES COURAGE

THE days of the long and lovely autumn were shortening, darkening, and ever more obviously assuming the dull and sober livery of winter. Indian Summer, her heart of fire bedreamed in opaline hazes, had been succeeded by the gusts and snow-flakes of Squaw Winter, and Lucy Parrish still lingered with Sally. Anne had made a reluctant departure, but Lucy resolutely refused to accompany her, and, to do Lucy justice, it was not alone the glamour of her play romance which held her, although Sally had accused her of it more than once.

"You, Lucy," she said to her on one occasion, "may in the course of time exhibit all the signs of old age, but you will never really grow up. You will always stay in the make-believe age, a pretty

little girl in a white embroidered frock and a blue sash."

"Sally," replied Lucy with some heat, "do you know that you always say anything you please to me, and probably always will? Yes, you do; and if you want to explore the most secret corners of my soul, you just throw open the door without even knocking and walk in, look around, and make any comments you like on the furniture and decorations. Yes, you do. Do not attempt to deny it. And I permit it, and never think of retaliating. I do not dare, any more than the rest of the world, to question you about your private affairs. But, Sally," slipping an arm through Sally's and rubbing her cheek up and down the shoulder of her taller friend, "Sally, I'm going to take my courage in my hands, no matter what the consequence may be." Lucy's voice was small and cajoling, and hardly indicative of the robust and heroic qualities she was claiming. "I know you think me a feather-head, but I've got some sense in certain directions, and Sally, I want to know one or two things."

"You do?" Sally smiled indulgently down upon

her. "Must be something awfully important. What is it?"

"First," Lucy took the courage she claimed for herself in both hands, "I want to know why that awful Mrs. Hurd is always snooping about here? Oh, Sally, it's no use your turning your head away and shaking me off like that; and you needn't walk away either, because I'll follow you, and ask you until you tell me. What is it? What does she want?"

But Sally was not thrusting the question aside in the cavalier manner Lucy had feared. After the first involuntary start of surprise, she had gazed rather frowningly before her, apparently weighing a matter which had occupied much of her thought.

"I wish you hadn't asked me that, Lucy," she said at last, "and yet I do not know what to do. I am troubled more than I can tell you. As for Mrs. Hurd, I should put a stop at once to her coming here. She is getting too outrageous, and yet, how can I?"

Lucy threw a sympathetic arm about her. "What is it, Sally dear? Tell me all about it." And Sally, who had been finding almost unbearable the strain



of doubt and pain and Mrs. Hurd's increasing and arbitrary demands for money, always more money, felt it a relief to pour into Lucy's ears the whole wretched story.

"But, Sally," cried her confidant, interrupting her in her last broken phrases, "why should you try to keep Mrs. Hurd quiet? Surely you could never believe such a thing of Mr. Streatham. It is all a horrible, wicked lie, of course."

"Lucy," Sally exclaimed, turning on her suddenly and looking at her fixedly, "do you mean to say you don't believe it?"

"Indeed I do not," Lucy indignantly averred. "Nothing could ever make me believe it. Oh, Sally, how could you—how could you? You love him, and I do not, and yet you could believe this of him, and I never, never could."

"You don't know all the circumstances." Sally's voice was muffled, broken. It was foreign to her to plead or explain.

"No, I do not know all the circumstances, and I do not want to. They would make no difference to me, who am only his friend." Lucy was merciless, all fiery indignation.

"But Lucy, you know how odd he is, how different from any one else."

"I know he is odd." Lucy's tone indicated that this was the limit of her concession.

"You know his queer, capricious humor. Don't you see that it is just the sort of an adventure that a man like himself might indulge in? Suppose he had told you, Lucy, the whole story as he told it to me, two or three days before Mrs. Hurd brought the newspaper. Suppose he had told it to you as if he had lived it, really taken part in it, and as if he were rather angry and disgusted with the remembrance of it, and yet amused by it? Oh, Lucy, don't you see—?"

"No, I do not see, for one moment." Lucy's soft, dimpled mouth was set in obstinate lines. "The whole thing, Sally, is that you are such a boss. You are so used to managing your own affairs and every one else's, carrying everything before you in a high-handed way, deciding things in a minute, and then going ahead on the assumption that you couldn't possibly make a mistake or be wrong; and you've followed your usual methods in this matter." Lucy had let herself go in the ardor of her championship.

"In talking to Anthony Streatham, you probably took it for granted that he was guilty. Oh, yes, you did. I can see it from what you have told me, and you tried to boss him, of course. That was a very dangerous game to try with him, Sally, because you can't do it. For all his queer ways, he's got more brains and better judgment than you have, and he's got a better heart than you have, for he's kind and tolerant, and you've behaved like a perfect b-brute." She paused at last, principally from lack of breath, and Sally turned such stricken eyes upon her, such a drawn and appalled face, that indignation gave place to compunction, and compunction to remorseful sympathy in Lucy's heart in less than the twinkling of an eye.

"Oh, it is I—I who am the brute," she wept. "Oh, my poor Sally!" She cast a protecting arm about her pale and silent companion. "How could I—how could I hurt you so? My poor Sally! Oh, I wouldn't have thought it of him."

"Him!" Sally threw off Lucy's arm and twitched impatiently. "What do you mean?"

"Why, I shouldn't ever have dreamed that he would do such a thing."

"Then all I have to say is that you are very easily convinced." Sally lifted her head now, the old sapphire lightning in her eyes, the rich color rising in her cheeks. "You began by probing into my affairs, by asserting your undying loyalty to Anthony Streatham. Then I endeavored to explain a little the reason for my feelings, and you blamed me furiously; and then in the next breath you whirl about and begin to accuse Anthony. It takes very little evidence to convince you."

Lucy sat gazing at her with staring, incredulous eyes and unbelieving ears.

And Sally lifted her passionate gaze to the sky. "Isn't there any loyalty in the world?" she cried. "Poor Tony, even those who call themselves your best friends one moment are ready to turn against you the next!"

Lucy's heart was broken. Sobbing bitterly, but without a word, she left the house and ran down the paths of the waste and desolate garden to the orchard. There she sat on the log of an apple tree, which had fallen a night or two before in a storm, and wept luxuriously, until the click of the gate and the appearance of Witherspoon constrained her care-

fully and finally to wipe her eyes and fumble hastily in the little gold box dangling from her waist for a mirror and powder-puff.

But nevertheless his love-quickenened eyes took immediate note of the traces of her recent volcanic emotion. "Lucy, Lucy!" He caught her hands in his and bent solicitously above her. "What is it? What has happened?"

At the sympathy in his voice the tears were ready to start again, but Lucy, mindful of reddened eyelids, made a brave effort to repress them. "I'm going home." In spite of herself her voice trembled. "I'm going home. Sally has been saying all sorts of things to me, and I'm going back to town to-day, even if I have to spend the winter with Anne. That will show you how dreadful it has been."

"Lucy dear," he shook her gently by the shoulders, "what is all this? Try and tell me just as clearly as you can, and do not get agitated."

And Lucy, eager to be comforted, nestled closer to him and began: "I've been suspecting for some time that that horrid old black raven of a Mrs. Hurd was coming here for no good, so to-day I sum-

moned up courage to ask Sally what it all meant, and she told me that weeks ago, before Anthony left, Mrs. Hurd had shown her a newspaper containing a description and photograph of the man Grisson, and the description of his accomplice served very well for Anthony, and Mrs. Hurd threatened to point out this resemblance to the sheriff unless Sally paid her a large sum of money, and Sally did so, and now she's been coming about here every few days trying to extort more."

"Great Heavens!" said Witherspoon. "Great Heavens, Lucy, is this really true?"

Lucy nodded. "And the worst of it is that Sally believes him guilty, and told him so, and that is why he went away."

"Indeed!" Witherspoon spoke curtly. "That explains many things. Indeed!"

"And when I defended him it made her angry, and when I agreed with her that things did look very much against him it made her angrier still," complained Lucy.

But for once in his life Witherspoon scarcely heard her. He was pondering deeply. "I think, in this case," he said at last, "that I shall act on my

own initiative. Yes, I think I shall go to Sally at once. It will be all right, Lucy. Do not worry. There are some things I can set straight, I am sure. You will not mind my leaving you, for I must see her immediately."

"No; go, go!" Lucy gave him a little push. "If it is in your power to make any of these crooked things a little straighter, for goodness' sake make haste to do it."

Witherspoon found Sally in her sitting-room, before her desk, but neither writing nor looking over her papers. Instead, she sat with her elbows propped on the open leaf, her chin sunk in her hands, staring absently and unseeingly at the rows of pigeonholes before her. She looked up quickly as Witherspoon entered, and then dropped her eyes and shielded the side of her face nearest the light with her hand, as if to conceal from him all traces of her recent emotion.

"Oh, good morning," she said. "Won't you sit down?"

"Mrs. Salt," said Witherspoon, standing beside the desk and speaking without preamble, "I have



just left Lucy, and she has told me of your recent conversation—”

“Naturally,” Sally interrupted him, laughing, although her laughter sounded a little forced. “I was starting after her to comfort her and receive her forgiveness a few moments ago, when Aunt Mandy mentioned that she had seen you riding by. Then I knew that Lucy had all the comfort she needed.”

Witherspoon waited until she had finished. “Lucy has also told me of Mrs. Hurd’s attempts to extort money from you.” He spoke as if he were merely finishing his original sentence, and had not noticed Sally’s interruption. “In view of this fact, I am going to act on my own initiative and without waiting to consult my friend Streatham.”

Sally’s eyes were fastened upon him, holding him with their intense question, but she did not speak.

“You have been paying out this money to Mrs. Hurd quite unnecessarily.” Witherspoon’s voice was cool, unimpassioned, as if merely stating a business fact, and yet to Sally’s ears it seemed infused with a certain sternness.

"What—what do you mean?" She half rose, her hands gripping the sides of the desk.

"You have been blaming Streatham unjustly." He was implacable.

She shivered as if she had been struck. "Oh," it was a deep-breathed interrogation, "do you mean it? Is it true? And Anthony was not—"

"Perfectly true." His words were crisp as a flail. "It happens to be a brother of Streatham's who is implicated in this matter—a younger brother, a wild scamp of a fellow, mad as a March hare. Old Anthony is as tame as a cart horse in comparison. Just before he came here for the harvest Anthony had succeeded in getting this boy out of the country. The fellow is not utterly bad, just wild and erratic. At least that is Tony's idea of him," he added with a rather grim smile. "I admit that it may be colored by affectionate prejudice."

Sally's pride was bowed in the dust; she covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Tony, Tony! To think that I have doubted you!" It was the cry of her soul. "Lucy was right. It's my horrible way of jumping at conclusions, of always being dead sure I'm right. And I failed him when I should

have trusted and believed. And then—" she went on, eager to confess, to show to the full her self-abasement, "when Mrs. Hill told me a few days ago that he had been right here all the time, in your little cabin on the river road, I was furious, because I had just half read his letter you had given me; and instead of seeing it as a characteristic bit of his queer humor—a little fantastic it is sometimes, you know, John—why, I simply raged. I felt that it insulted my intelligence. And since then I've been trying to forgive him. Think of it! I fell so low as that—putting myself on a pedestal and trying to realize that he was a poor, moralless creature, and that it was my duty to forgive him. It's—it's worthy of Mrs. Hill or Anne. I've always known that only vile-minded people had moral standards. He hasn't any, thank God. He's far, far above them. He's just kind and loving and tolerant. He would never put on any one the indignity of forgiving them. He'd never think that any one could or would wrong him, or that anybody needed to be forgiven."

Sally's red head, carried so proudly in storm and sunshine, was bowed now. She had bent it upon

her arms outflung upon the desk; but again she lifted her streaming blue eyes to Witherspoon's.

"Tell me," she besought him, "what I must do. May I go to him, there in his little cottage, and tell him how humbled, how ashamed I am?"

Witherspoon hesitated a moment. "Would it not be best for me to carry a note from you? You do not want others to know of this matter, which lies only between you two."

"Others? What do you mean?" she exclaimed in a puzzled voice.

"The Hurds," he replied, after his laconic fashion.

"The Hurds!" She was calm, ominously calm, in a moment, her voice ringing with a deep note of inquiry.

"Yes, Hilda and her father. They had some difficulty at home, and were wandering about without any very definite idea of what they were going to do, when Tony ran across them and took them in."

There was silence for a moment or two. "How long have they been there?" Her voice was low and controlled.

"Two or three weeks, I believe."

Again there was silence. Sally was recalling the first evening when Streatham had told her that he loved her, when, the world forgetting, they two had stood gazing into each other's eyes, and then across the meadows had come that far call of melody, Hilda singing, and Anthony had forgotten her, Sally, forgotten everything to listen.

"Shall I take him a note or a verbal message from you?" asked Witherspoon, finally breaking the silence.

Her hair had been drawn back meekly plain, but now it seemed to crinkle and wave out from her brow in red, rebellious tendrils; her eyes were like blue steel played upon by a lambent flame; Witherspoon blinked under their momentary glance.

"Neither!" she cried, and, slamming up the leaf of her desk, without excuse or apology flashed out of the room.

## CHAPTER XXI

### DAUGHTER OF DREAMS

**I**T was the twilight hour, the early dusk of a winter afternoon. Without, desolate, dim and cold enough, but within Streatham's cabin, warm and cozy, the fire of logs illuminated the shadows which gathered more densely in the corners of the room. An hour for reflection, meditation, dreams. Hilda had curled up in a chair before the hearth, gazing at the leaping, intermittent flames, and Streatham had, as it grew too dim to write, left his manuscript on a table before the window and seated himself at the piano, where he sat playing in a sort of reverie, drifting inconsequently from one thing to another.

Presently he asked, without turning about: "Hilda, what are you thinking of?"

"I'm seeing pictures," she answered. "I always see such beautiful pictures when you play. Just

now there were lovely ones. At first everything was dark, and then I saw a beautiful color like violets in the dusk, and then moonlight, pale, golden moonlight on the water, and then you changed; you didn't play the music the river sings any more, nor the music the wind sighs in the trees, but something gayer. Then I could see the fairies, little blue and white and pink and green fairies dancing."

"Ah, Hilda, what a daughter of dreams you are!" He left the piano and, taking a chair opposite her, rested his arm upon the table and leaned his cheek upon his hand. The gleam of the firelight, instead of softening the lines of his face, seemed to throw into relief and to accentuate its haggard wanness. All the illusion of soft shadow and ruddy glow could not conceal the fact that his cheeks and temples had hollowed almost startlingly, that his eyes were very weary, and, in spite of the interest he was manifesting now, there was a tired ring in his voice.

"Tell me," he continued, his gaze upon her, "what you would rather do than anything else in the world."

"What do I want more than anything in the world?" she pondered. "Oh, more than anything



else, I want to sing. There isn't anything else," she said simply.

"Ah, the artist's desire for recognition!" he mused. "You want to sing to great audiences, to know that you are delighting thousands, to hear the thunders of applause. Is that what intoxicates your imagination?"

She twisted her fingers together and looked a little unhappy. He who always understood had in some way failed. "Not just that," she murmured. "Ah," she sighed impatiently again, "it's so hard to say things, to explain. I never could talk very easily, but, Mr. Streatham, I can't help singing. I'm only alive when I'm singing. It's this way: When I'm not singing I'm just dull Hilda, very shy, and afraid of everybody, and there's a kind of a sadness and a jar. Oh, it's like discord, but when I'm singing, that all melts away, that sadness, and there's a wonderful sense of warmth and color. I'm happy, there's nothing in all the world that I fear, and a sense of power comes to me, as if it were flowing through me. It's—it's as if I were saying: 'Now I shall reach something.' I don't just throw my voice into the empty air; I send it to some one

that I know is waiting and listening for it. Maybe some one that I shall never see, but some one thousands of miles away who is waiting for it. I say: 'Go, little song, and make some one who is sad happy and glad.' That is when I feel bright and merry. And sometimes I know—I just know, Mr. Streatham—that the power in my voice, the little wings that lift it higher and higher, goes to some suffering person, a sick child, perhaps, and makes them well again."

Anthony looked at her long and unobserved, for she had spoken with her gaze upon the flames, and still held it there.

"Oh, daughter of dreams," he muttered at last, so low that she could not catch his words, "why were you ever sent to tread the Via Crucis, I wonder?"

"Hilda," he said a few moments later, "you must not think me impertinent if I talk to you about yourself. I do not mean it so. It is only that I want to help you, and I don't want to meddle. God forbid!" He twitched his eyebrows and shoulders irritably.

"Impertinent?" she said wonderingly. "That's funny. I don't believe you could be, Mr. Streatham."

Streatham had been filling his pipe in a lesiurely fashion, and now he leaned forward and lighted it with a splinter of wood which he thrust into the flame. "It is very evident, Hilda," he remarked, "that the earth is not your mother, and that you have no very ardent yearnings for the 'life of fruit and corn.' The stars and the mountain peaks for you; isn't it so? You have a fine, aspiring taste for the inaccessible."

He smoked and meditated for a season. "Hilda," he said finally and with decision, "it's got to be done some way or another."

"What?" she asked.

"This: You shall go to the city of romance with your father—several cities of romance, and you shall have your voice cultivated. My knowledge of life prevents me from rushing headlong into rash prediction. I have met the unexpected just turning the corner on too many different occasions; but, nevertheless, I think it would take a string of adjectives a yard long to describe your future. It will, I am convinced, be a most adjectivey future—nice, glittery, spangly adjectives. And you won't care a rap about them.

"Think of it! when there are so many who would be drunk with delight at the thought of getting even a tiny slice of such a future as yours. But there you'll stand, right in the middle of your future, Hilda, with the treasure of earth heaped about your feet, and you'll be encrusted with cobwebby laces and hung with jewels. And there you'll stand, quite unconscious of them, with your wistful, dreaming eyes fixed on the cold, cold stars, and the snow-covered mountain peaks, so difficult and distant. And every one will want to shake you except myself.

"But not I." As he sat gazing at her the understanding sympathy in his eyes deepened and changed until at last it became a yearning spiritual hunger. The fascination which her strange, mystical nature had always exercised for him had never been more potent. All the dreamer, the adventurer who longed to explore untrodden paths and fare forth on an unknown quest rose from some submerged depths of his nature and claimed him. He heard again that far, clear call of melody across the sunset fields and the soul of him rose up to answer her. For a moment or through uncounted eons he seemed to be

following her through worlds beyond worlds of light and beauty.

And then a great log fell apart, scattering the embers and sending up a shower of sparks, and he was back again in the familiar world of every day. She was merely quaint, childlike Hilda sitting opposite to him on the hearth, and more than ever was he conscious of the unassuaged longing of his tired heart for his beloved, human Sally.

"No," he said taking up the conversation again, "I will understand in a way and sympathize, but not the rest. Believe me, they will want to shake you."

"Will they?" she laughed.

"Of course they will. Are they not all sensible men—and women, especially women? I wonder, Hilda, why every one prides himself more on possessing common sense than on genius, or a great and tender heart, or any of man's more pleasing attributes. Common sense. Faugh! It's the deadliest of the seven deadly virtues.

"Tell me, Hilda," he said suddenly, "did you—did you ever really care for Grissom?"

Her delicate face flushed crimson. "I—I—thought so once," she answered in a low voice, "but

when I learned about—about the way he lived, I couldn't care about him any more. I felt sorry for him, but I couldn't love him."

Anthony nodded without speaking, but presently he began again:

"Ah, Hilda, you are a wonderful listener. Silence and a sympathetic understanding, what more could one ask of a listener? And in this firelit, twilight hour, I could give you the freedom of the city of my mind and heart. And that is almost an impossibility with me, child. Any sign of the interest that verges on curiosity, and there is very little interest that does not, and all the gates clang to on the instant and are fast locked by a combination which even I do not understand. Hilda, I will give my brother my cloak also; if it amused me to let him smite one cheek, I should probably offer him the other. I can even fancy myself giving my body to be burned, but my individuality is my own. Man or woman infringes on that at his peril, I can not answer a personal question; it is not a case of will not, but can not. But, listen to me now. I am sitting here talking like a garrulous old woman. What is that?" He roused himself to listen.

There was the sound of voices and footfalls with-out.

"It is father and Mr. Witherspoon," said Hilda, and hastened to open the door. There was a trace of excitement in Mr. Hurd's manner, but Witherspoon looked grave and a bit worried. Streatham threw a fresh log on the fire. "You'll stay for supper, Witherspoon," he said. "You've got to."

Witherspoon looked up to shake his head dissentingly and then, apparently struck by something in his friend's appearance, continued to regard him steadily for a moment or so, the gravity of his expression deepening.

"What's the matter, Anthony?" he said in a low voice. "You look anything but fit. Are your visitors too much for you? I rather feared they would be. We must make some other arrangements at once."

"No, oh no." Streatham passed his hand across his brow. "It isn't that. Lord knows just what it is. Winter coming on, I dare say. It's nothing anyway. I'm all right, only I feel tired, deucedly tired."

The two men had withdrawn a little from Hilda



and her father as they talked, and now Witherspoon drummed moodily on the window-pane.

"I think it's a great deal more to the point to ask what's the matter with you, Witherspoon?" said Anthony with a short laugh, but eying the other man keenly. "You certainly are wearing a rueful countenance. What is the matter?"

"Lots of things." Witherspoon's tone was as moody as his face. "The worst of them is, that that scoundrel of a Grissom is back here again."

"Good Lord!" Anthony started back, his apathy gone. "When? Where? How do you know?"

"Saw him," said Witherspoon. "Hurd and I met him up near my house. That's the magnet that's drawn him, I imagine," indicating Hilda with a backward jerk of the head. "I told him just what he might expect. He's a yellow dog, of course, so I think he will be off without delay. I hope so, because if Washburne gets an inkling of his being here, why, the game's up, as far as Grissom is concerned."

"'A fool there was,' " murmured Streatham cynically. "Think of a captain of industry, or shall we say, *Chevalier d'industrie*, like Grissom in hopeless

thrall to a poor little homespun daughter of dreams with her eyes fixed on the stars and the mountain peaks."

"Tony! Where are you galloping to now, on that knock-kneed old Pegasus of yours?" Witherspoon was half laughing, half impatient.

"I'm back to earth again. My Pegasus can't stay up long; he gets blind staggers in the air and tumbles down very soon. But truly, John, I hope you impressed on Grissom the imperative and immediate necessity of clearing out."

"I tried to," replied Witherspoon, "but Mr. Hurd and himself had some conversation together. It might be a good plan to find out just what it pertained to."

"I know without asking," Anthony twisted his mouth humorously. "It dealt with the unexplored countries within the boundaries of the fourth dimension, and kindred topics, all of immense interest to Grissom."

"No doubt," laughed Witherspoon. "Good Heavens! It's as dark as pitch; I must be off."

"I'll accompany you through the woods to keep

the bears away," said Streatham, catching up his cap and coat.

Hilda had evidently been repressing some emotion as long as Streatham and Witherspoon were in the room, but now she turned and caught her father by the coat.

"But you didn't tell him that I was here?"

Her father laid his hand upon her hair. "There is no occasion for agitation, Hilda," he said rather rebukingly. "What else was there to do? He asked about you and asked where we were, if—if not at our former home, and I explained that we were stopping here a few days before continuing our journey."

Hilda turned from him and buried her face in her hands. "Oh, what, what have you done?" she murmured helplessly.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE HUNT FOR GRISSOM

**I**T was the next afternoon after the conversation with Witherspoon before any of the members of her household saw Sally again. Lucy, especially, had felt some anxiety when her friend failed to make her usual early morning appearance, and had sent Wilmerdine to make some inquiries; but in response to her knock Sally had informed her that she was to carry word to Mrs. Parrish that Mrs. Salt was quite well, but did not wish to be disturbed on any account. With that word, Lucy was forced to content herself.

At the mid-day dinner, however, Sally appeared, looking much as usual. Whatever storm and stress she had known, her superb health was proof against any very noticeable ravages, and cold water is a wonderful factor in obliterating any traces of a sleepless night.

After dinner they sat about the fire which burned cheerily in Sally's sitting-room. The day was bright but chilly, and Sally felt a languid disinclination to move about. Mrs. Nesbit sat monotonously clicking her knitting needles; Lucy read. The warmth, the soothing atmosphere, all induced a drowsiness in Sally. She settled her red head comfortably against the back of her chair and closed her eyes only to open them again with a start. Lucy had jumped to her feet and run to the window, and Mrs. Nesbit had ceased to knit and begun to tremble.

"Dear me!" cried Sally, "what a clatter of hoofs! And what does it mean? And all those shouts!"

"A lot of men and boys rushing by," said Lucy from her post at the window. "What can it mean?"

"I hope it isn't an earthquake," said Mrs. Nesbit fervently.

"Ah!" exclaimed Lucy, "now we shall know. Here is Mrs. Hill just coming through the gate."

Mrs. Hill was, indeed, making such haste as her bulk permitted. Her skirts were caught up firmly on either side, her bonnet was canted in close proximity to one ear, and her face was scarlet from her exertions, for had she not abandoned her usual

slow and stately progress in the endeavor to be the first to bear the tidings of some unusual occurrence?

For the first time, in all probability, she found herself welcomed by Lucy and Sally. Lucy, in fact, ran and opened the door in her eagerness to admit her.

"What is it, Mrs. Hill?" she cried. "I am sure you must know."

But the visitor was, for the moment, past speech. She could only puff and pant and gasp, but after comfortably ensconcing herself in an easy chair, and untying her bonnet strings and casting them over her shoulders with her habitual gesture, she found voice.

"There's something awful going on," she announced to her waiting auditors, who leaned forward, their eyes fixed on her face, "and I just can't find out what. I don't know what it can possibly be, but the road's full of men and boys on foot and horseback, and Jake Washburne's just careering around."

"But couldn't you hear what it was?" pouted Lucy. "I didn't know anything ever escaped you, Mrs. Hill."

"Few things do," responded that lady significantly, "but," and her mien was somewhat crest-fallen, "I couldn't get any satisfaction out of those crazy men. I even caught one or two of them as they passed me, but they only mumbled something and jerked themselves away."

"I've got to find out what it is," said Sally, roused to interest. "Wilmerdine," to that maiden, who had just entered to put another log on the fire, "go and tell some one at the stables to saddle Berta for me." The light had returned to her eyes, the color to her cheeks, at the anticipation of action. "Think of it, Mrs. Hill! I shall have the news before you will. But cheer up. It will be the first time on record."

"Oh, but Sally," remonstrated Lucy, "you haven't an idea what it is. There may be danger. Anyway, you know how nervous Berta is; and she's so fresh. You haven't had her out for several days. Do let us wait patiently. What is the use of rushing about?"

"Bah!" returned Sally, her eyes sparkling, "sit here in the house when there's something going on, something to do, perhaps?"



“‘A short life in the saddle, Lord,  
Not a long life by the fire.’

Anything is better than that. Well, Wilmerdine?”

“There ain’t a man on the place, Miss Sally, not even a stable-boy.” Wilmerdine’s eyes were rolling with the importance of her message.

“Humph! It is time I was stirring.” Sally lifted her eyebrows. “I’ll just saddle Berta myself.”

It was the work of a few moments to buckle a saddle on Berta and then swing herself into it. As she turned out into the road she saw that it was almost deserted. This fact in itself surprised her. Her first idea was that there was a fire on one of the farms about her, but, scan the horizon as she would in every direction, she saw no traces of smoke. As she drew near the Hurd cottage she discerned the tall, dark figure of Mrs. Hurd standing at the gate, the inevitable Trip beside her. Her hand shielded her eyes as she looked up and down the road. Her glance, her whole figure expressed a sort of tense and dreadful expectation.

“What’s going on?” said Sally curtly, reining in

Berta, who pranced and pirouetted like a ballet dancer.

"Oh, Mrs. Salt!" Mrs. Hurd's eyes might be avid, almost burning, her whole figure might be tense, but her voice was as suavely calm as ever. "I'm afraid there's going to be some trouble," she said, shaking her head.

"You mean you're afraid there's not going to be some trouble," commented Sally to herself shrewdly.

"You see," continued Mrs. Hurd, "Grissom's been here again, and Jake Washburne's out for him. Oh, he can't get away this time."

"Here!" cried Sally unbelievably. "Here? Why on earth has he come back?"

"I don't know," replied Mrs. Hurd, meekly licking her lips in a kind of awful joy.

"Which way did they go?" asked Sally sharply. "Oh, I see," as two or three horsemen turned into the road ahead of her at full gallop.

Without a further word or glance at Mrs. Hurd, she was off again like a shot. As Lucy had timidly stated, Berta was fresh, and Sally turned toward the hills, riding like the wind in pursuit of the

sheriff. Occasionally she drew up a moment to get what information she could, in the main from women standing at their gates, as to the direction he had taken, and then, with a word to Berta, she was away again.

And Sally rode with a high heart. She and Berta were one in the delirious joy of wild and rapid movement in that mad race against time. As Berta spurned the commonplace earth with her dainty, flying, careless hoofs, striking sparks when she deigned to touch it, Sally, exultant, felt herself lifted above the dust of the world. Did she not see fields and woods and hamlets flow past her? The earth ran like a river, and she and Berta cut the wind like an arrow. Regret, sorrow, heartache were all forgotten. Everything was forgotten. She felt as a bird, knowing only the rapture of flight. The blue sky above her, the yellow road before her, and she poised between them, free, unlimited, cleaving the wind, and a part of it—a thing of the air, bodyless, unfettered.

“Berta! Berta!!” she cried. “We could give them a day’s start on their old plow horses and beat

them to the goal. What show have they against your little quicksilver hoofs, you thoroughbred?"

And now they had reached the hills, and Berta began to slow down and pick her way with a sagacious and dainty precision. The roads were rough, often mere wagon trails, and full of ruts. At last, at the entrance of a deep gully, the mare stopped and, lifting her delicate head, appeared to listen. Sally, too, bent her ear and also listened intently. It seemed to her that she heard a shout or two just beyond the hills which rose steeply from one side of them. And then her attention was arrested by a much nearer sound. She turned her eyes quickly in the direction from whence it came. There was a rustling in the bushes, the sound of broken branches, and Grissom stumbled out, his clothes torn, his hat gone, his face a dull, sickly yellow from terror.

"Mrs. Salt!" he gasped, staggering down the road toward her. "Mrs. Salt, you're a kind woman. Oh, for God's sake, save me! There's a mob of them. You know what a mob is. They'll lynch me, sure!"

Sally was on the ground in a minute. "They

will if they can get you, but not while I'm here," she cried. "Up with you. Berta will carry you like a bird. Let me think a second," as he scrambled into the saddle. "Where are they? Right over there?" She pointed toward the hill.

"Yes, a mob of them. My God!" He was shaking like a jelly.

"Ride through this gully," speaking with her usual authoritative decision, "until you see a road leading to the left. Then follow it. It will take you to the village of Wheaton. There tell the station agent that you have been working on Mrs. Salt's farm and that she sent you to catch the train. You are going to town on a special errand for her. Leave the mare with him and tell him that I will send for her this evening. Berta is all right, but don't pull too hard on her mouth. Now be off."

Bending low in the saddle, and with some half-choked thanks murmured through his chattering teeth, he was gone. Sally watched him until he was out of sight, and then again listened a moment to catch the direction whence came the shouting and noise. It seemed to be all concentrated in one locality instead of intermittent and scattering, as it

had been previously. She hurried up the ascent, and as she reached the top she saw that the long downward slope was crowded with men and boys, standing as if they had suddenly been arrested in their upward rush and were awed and overcome by some unexpected occurrence. In the center of this wide human circle, and where the hillside fell into a little cup, Sally saw a man lying, while Washburne and one or two of his deputies bent above him. On the mad, unthinking onrush of passion a halt had been called. A hush had fallen. The progress of the mob, irresistible, uncalculating, instinctive, had been stayed by a power they could not comprehend. The men and boys on the outskirts of the circle were retreating, literally melting away with white, scared faces, impressed with some indefinable sense of disaster.

Sally stood for a moment on the crest of the hill above them. The low afternoon sun shone like a great, transparent red globe through the black branches of the leafless trees. In that still strong but cold light the faces of the men assumed a certain ghastly and unreal pallor, and their figures seemed to stand out as if silhouetted against the sad,

austere hills. It was but a second that Sally gazed down upon them, and then she flew down the slope. Her hair had become loosened during her ride, and had slipped half-way down her back.

"What are you doing here, Sally Salt?" called one old man.

Sally stopped a little above them on the hillside.

"Not what you are, Rufe Eaton," she called back. Then, as she looked over the group, her face suddenly went a deadly white, her eyes shot sparks of fire.

"Out for a man-hunt, aren't you, all of you? Oh, it's fine sport, big game, isn't it?" High and clear rang her stinging tones.

"We're out in the cause of justice, Sally Salt," called back the man. "We're helping the sheriff, and pertecting our homes from criminals."

"A lot you care about the crime!" scoffed Sally. "There's mighty few of you here that wouldn't be guilty of as bad or worse if you only had the chance and the brains. I know you all, every man of you. You want the excitement of a man-hunt. That's all a mob ever does want. You want to go crazy with brutal passion, be drunk with it, and then justify



yourselves with the plea of righteous indignation. Ugh! You make me so tired, and I'll bet you make God tired!"

"Why don't you mind your own business, Sally Salt?"

"It isn't enough for me," she bantered sweetly, "so I'm kind enough to manage yours, too."

"I'd like to see you prevent the cause of justice," called another man from the center of the group. "We're out for Grissom, the thief, and we're going to get him, and what's more, we're going to string him up to the nearest tree. And if you don't keep out of this you may get yourself jostled some."

As he finished there rose a murmur from the crowd, low, swelling in volume, ominous, implacable, and the mass heaved heavily forward as one man.

"And I'd like to see you try, Jack Wade!" called back Sally undaunted. "Just go ahead and do it, and to-morrow I'll be after the lot of you like a whirlwind. I'll foreclose the mortgages I hold on your patches of ground. I'll see that you pay back the money most of you owe me, or I'll attach everything you've got to attach. When I get through

with you all, you'll look like the years the locusts have eaten."

Man gazed at man, the pale glance of consternation. Their fingers curved. How gladly they would have choked this Sally Salt, standing there, arrogant, red-headed, damnably successful, shamelessly, wantonly dangling their common family skeleton before their eyes. There was no gainsaying her threat. Each man read its verity in the other's averted gaze. She could put most of them out in the roadside if she were so minded. But would she? Gazing up at her where she stood poised like some splendid avenging Victory, each man realized with a sinking sensation that she probably would.

"Now, don't give me any back talk. Go home, all of you!" She waved them back with hot, imperious impatience, and with growls, imprecations, muttered threats, assertions of independence, they dispersed, moving in moody groups in the direction which led to their various homes.

Then Sally hastened down the hill to the sheriff, who still bent his ear against the prone man's heart. She cast but one glance at this old man, who lay

with ghastly face and closed eyes, and then dropped on her knees beside him. "Oh," she breathed across him, "it is Mr. Hurd! What does this mean?"

"It means," said Washburne, with a hoarse effort to speak calmly, "that for some crazy reason the old man put on Grissom's coat and hat and led us a chase. Threw us clear off the track. I wouldn't have thought he was that smart."

"But what is it?" faltered Sally. "Why is he lying here?"

"Shot," said Washburne. "I'm afraid he's done for. I—did—it," in a dry whisper. He tore up a handful of grass and threw it from him. "Hilda will never—" His voice broke.

"Has any one gone for a doctor?"

"I sent one of my men," Washburne replied. "There's nothing to do till he comes. You won't need me, and, by God, I can't stay here to see him die." He flung himself into the trees.

There was silence for a time, and then the old man lifted his wonderful, luminous eyes to hers. He began to speak; his voice was a little stronger.

"I don't have to travel to find out what lies beyond the hills. I know now, at last." His glance

held some radiant realization; his voice, feeble, gasping, failing, sang a pæan of triumph.

“When I found they were after Grissom, I wanted to help him. I had to help him, for I had told him where Hilda was. I didn’t care for Grissom— I never thought much about him, but when he was in danger, when it came to me that I could save him, why, everything was changed. In giving all I had, I found everything. It was as if I had touched a spring and a door opened into the world that I had only seen in glimpses. It was like going from shadow into sunlight. And I knew at last what lay beyond the hills. Sally Salt,” his voice was weaker, but his eyes gazed past her into those worlds whose shining portals opened so easily at the sesame “sacrifice,” “what lies beyond the hills is love—love, that lies above and about and beyond everything. . . That is all there is.”

And, having preached his gospel to the only living creature near him, and given as freely as he had received, albeit painfully and with effort, the old seeker presently set forth on his farther quest.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ANTHONY COMES HOME

LUCY and John Witherspoon walked, as had been their wont for many months, up and down the garden paths. The paths, as well as the flower beds, were covered with snow, the sky was dull and leaden, and an east wind blew piercingly and sang an eery and desolate song through the shrubbery.

Witherspoon looked down a bit anxiously at Lucy. She was so muffled in furs that only the tip of her nose and her eyes were visible; nevertheless, the wind was incredibly penetrating. "Sure you're not cold?" he asked for perhaps the twentieth time.

"Sure, sure, sure," she insisted merrily, "and even if I were I would prefer it to the warm fire-side, for Mrs. Nesbit is sitting on one side of the hearth and Mrs. Hill on the other, and they are having an undisturbed feast of little cakes and coffee, and gossip is flowing like wine. They were

talking symptoms and scandal when I left, and by this time they have probably buried every man of us. Oh, John," she shivered and slipped her hand through his arm, "I simply can not listen to them when Anthony is lying so ill. Is he any better this afternoon?"

"I'm afraid not," said Witherspoon gravely.

"So many unhappy things have happened since last summer," said Lucy in a mournful little voice that sounded as if tears were very near the surface.

"And not the least of them, to me," Witherspoon looked down at her with a tender, half-sorry smile, "is that you've abandoned our little romance, thrown it aside as you used to throw your dolls away as soon as you had licked the paint off their cheeks and jerked off their wigs and punched them with the scissors to see if they were stuffed with sawdust."

"You always laughed at me then," interpolated Lucy.

"But you see I do not laugh now. You see, it is my doll, my most cherished doll, in this instance."

"But John," Lucy's pretty eyes were rather round and shocked, "it would have been heartless for us to have kept on playing when there has been this

sorrow—old Mr. Hurd's tragic death, Anthony's illness, and Sally's grief."

"So it has been only play, a pastime to you?" and, half-laughing as his voice was, it was still half-sorry.

There was no answer, but in the little line of cheek that showed just above her nose and below her eyes there was a stain of crimson. "You—you—" she was obviously embarrassed, "the last time we played—" she checked herself with a quick look at him, "the last time we were in the romance—" She paused and wrinkled her brow in the frantic effort to remember; then illumination came, a lightning-flash, and she buried her nose in her muff.

"Yes, the last time," Witherspoon had the air of kindly refreshing her memory, "I was pleading for a kiss, and you pretended to be terribly shocked, and ran up-stairs, and just as I was feeling enormously depressed, you put your head out of the window and mocked me. You said:

"'Fain would I climb but that I fear to fall;  
If thy heart fail thee, do not climb at all.'"



"Yes, and you called back that not to climb would be an admission of heart-failure, and you began to climb up the porch, and Mrs. Hill came in the gate and saw you."

"My grandmother taught me to knit when I was a boy," said Witherspoon with apparent irrelevance, "and I know that you must always take up a dropped stitch."

Before Lucy grasped the import of his words, he stooped and gently kissed the visible rim of cheek just below the eye.

A blast more bitter and piercing than all the icy winds of that chilling afternoon blew from the sullen skies, but neither Lucy nor Witherspoon knew it. She only pressed her cheek more deeply into his shoulder, and he kissed her eyes this time.

"Why, John," Lucy lifted her head and gazed about her wonderingly, "how much more beautiful the garden looks now than it did in summer. Then it was full of lilies and roses and butterflies, and commonplace things, and now, look at the beautiful, smooth, white snow, and the lovely bare, black shrubbery." She gazed about her with eyes that proclaimed her the discoverer of a new world.

"And look at the sky, Lucy." Witherspoon's voice exceeded hers in sincerity and enthusiasm. "I never saw such an exquisite gray. And what delicious air!"

"Ah, yes." Lucy's tone was one of complete satisfaction with the existing order. "The winter world is the real world of romance. And, dear John, how much better the real is than the play romance!"

"And wasn't the play romance the least bit real to you?" asked Witherspoon. "It was all real to me."

"Certainly it was real," said Lucy promptly, "only this is realer."

Streatham was indeed very ill. It had been decided that it were better not to attempt to move him from the cabin, so he lay there, surrounded by every comfort which Sally could devise, and she and Hilda nursed him.

Sally had naturally assumed charge of everything. She would inevitably have done so under any circumstances, but in this case it was necessary. There was no other alternative. Hilda endeavored

to help her, to assist her in every possible way. She was so anxious to do just as she was told, so obedient and tractable, and so conspicuously, even brilliantly inefficient, that Sally's small endowment of patience was almost spent. More and more frequently she suggested to Hilda that it were the part of wisdom for her to rest and husband her strength. More and more she relied upon the deft and skilful and silent Wilmerdine for assistance; and Hilda, quite speechless for the most part, with wistful, appealing eyes, would, upon finding this or that little duty delegated to Wilmerdine, attempt some new task and prove more obviously than ever her almost pathetic ineptitude.

Sally had grown so used to seeing her creep about, silent, humble, almost apathetic, that one morning, when Hilda beckoned her from the sick chamber, she was so surprised at this evidence of initiative that she merely motioned Wilmerdine to take her place by Anthony's bedside and followed Hilda into the little kitchen. There she looked about her, expecting to see some sign of disaster and to hear a confession of Hilda's latest blunder. But, thanks to Wilmerdine, everything was in spotless order; the room was warm and bright, a good fire burned,

for it was very cold without, and the tea-kettle hissed pleasantly upon the stove.

Sally looked at Hilda with some surprise, and then looked again; for there was in her bearing a subtle but undoubted change. Ever since her father's death and the beginning of Anthony's illness she had conveyed the impression of some sad and drooping flower. Everything about her had drooped—head, eyelids, mouth, shoulders; but now her shoulders were straight, her head uplifted. It was as if she had been refreshed by some revivifying and potent ichor. She looked at Sally, and in that glance was something so remote and—yes, authoritative, that a queer little chill ran down over her listener.

“I’ve been all wrong, Mrs. Salt,” said the girl simply and directly. “I haven’t been doing right, and I know it now. I woke up early this morning, long before it was light, and it came to me all at once; I don’t know how, but it was all clear to me. I’ve been trying to help him get well, trying to help you nurse him, trying to do everything in your way. And you see how useless I’ve been. I’ve just broken and spoiled everything I touched. That is because I wasn’t trying to help in my own way. You can

do all these things that I can't because it's your way. You can make him comfortable and give him the nursing he needs, and I can not. But," and there came a radiance to her face, a light in her eyes, "I can do something for him that you can't do."

The sincerity of her tone, the joy in her face, precluded doubt. Sally leaned forward and clasped her hands. "Oh, Hilda, what?" she besought. "His fever is higher; he is certainly worse. What can you do?"

"I can sing," said Hilda with a solemn fervor. "Oh, why haven't I thought of it before! Why? Because I was trying to be some one else, and I'm only Hilda, who can do just one thing."

"Oh." There was a blank and bitter disappointment in Sally's voice. Her hands fell at her side. "Oh, yes, you might soothe him, if he were able to bear it."

Hilda shook her head and smiled a faint, high smile of undaunted assurance. "You don't understand," she began.

Wilmerdine appeared noiselessly in the doorway. "I guess you better come in to Mr. Anthony, Miss Sally; he's getting awful restless."

Sally breathed a conscience-stricken exclamation,

and would have hastened in to Anthony's chamber, but Hilda was before her. "I will go," she said. "Please wait here." She closed the door between them.

Sally stood irresolute, striving to comprehend this new Hilda and understand her strange attitude. And while she hesitated she became aware of a silence which seemed to have fallen over the house, a silence which yet seemed to hold the beat of mighty wings. Then there rose the sound of Hilda's singing, low, pure, as if it flowed from some infinite ocean of peace, tideless, serene, deep upon deeps of calm; and then, from the heart of that unfathomable and boundless peace, there rose and swelled a new note, a high command of life. It was like chimes of silver bells, ringing, swinging from some cloud-built tower of Heaven. Free from all stain of earth, unscorched by any knowledge of grief or sin, Hilda's voice on wings of joy floated upward through all light and touched the mountain peaks and stars.

And Sally listened, awed, believing. All about her, through the cabin, she still felt the beat of wings. Ah, this was no place for her, who had demanded proof before she would believe and forgive.

Let her take herself and her doubts away. What place had she among cherubim and seraphim? How could she bring her gift to the altar, who had only forgiven when the certainty of Anthony's innocence had been forced upon her?

Throwing a heavy cloak about her, she stole from the house and into the forest. The snow covered the ground. The trees, bare, bereft of their leaves, stretched away in every direction, brown at hand, mere purple shadows in the distance. The instinct to be near Anthony prevented her from wandering far away from the cabin, so, folding her cloak more closely about her, she sat down upon a fallen log.

The awe lingered with her, and the mighty wings still seemed to encompass her. She looked up at the smooth, bare branches above her head. If Hilda had sung out there as she had sung yonder to Anthony, would not those—could not those naked boughs have burst into bud and blossom at that call of life? Would not the Spring have smiled where Winter frowned so austere? Almost she believed it.

How long she sat there she did not know, but at



last she heard her name, and looked up to see Hilda running toward her.

"His fever is gone. He has slept a long time, and now he is conscious and asking for you," panted the girl, her face radiant.

Together they hastened to the cabin; but it was Sally alone who entered Streatham's chamber.

"Sally," he murmured, his eyes seeking hers.

She dropped beside the bed and, lifting his hand, laid her cheek against it; her eyes were wet with tears.

"I'm back from a far country, Sally," with his old whimsical twisted smile.

"You shall always go here, there, everywhere you please!" she cried, throwing her arms about him. "I'm tired of trying to boss people."

"Sure of it, S—Sally?" How his eyes laughed! "But don't send me away soon. Let me stay with you here a long time. I've been so tired, Sally," he nestled his head more deeply in the hollow of her arm, "and you're so maternal."

















00 5101 007

7